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COMICS & GAMING

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BUILDING THE DC UNIVERSE

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THE GATES ARE OPEN

Another year and another E3 has breezed through Los Angeles, only this was no ordinary E3. This was a console launch E3, and as a result, the stakes were higher, the audience were bigger and the reaction to announcements and policies was far more dramatic than anyone was expecting.

Most people don't get to attend E3, but for those who do, the experience is a mixed one. It's both exhausting because of the three to four days of non-stop coverage, and satisfying because if you're a gamer, then this is basically a sneak preview of Christmas, and sometimes you get to sit down and actually play these games. Those are the two constants at any E3, but then there's that third pillar, the winds of change that come with new machines and it created a very different mood. The press conferences—which are normally more about games than anything else—are focused heavily on trying to convince both the press and the global public that beyond their normal, $60 purchases, they'll want to set aside a few hundred dollars for a new machine. Considerably more if people are inclined to own all the hardware available.

The games themselves occupy that uneasy niche of being produced on more powerful hardware while still showing traces of the previous generation, an occasional, necessary concession for making games that can work on present and future hardware. But there's also an air of uncertainty to some of these games, especially in light of the dramatic difference between E3 presentation and final product. A lot of games being shown this year—particularly on the Xbox One—weren't actually running on the hardware itself, but PCs which can obviously be tuned to show off performance at its best. Past experience has been a harsh teacher about putting faith in an impressive E3 demo, only find the release product to be bitterly disappointing once its forced to work within the confines of actual hardware. *Aliens: Colonial Marines* is a recent, cautionary example of this.

There's also the wind of change in policies. Microsoft initially made its mandate clear, and that was one of control. They wanted to control the way games were played, re-sold and even shared. This was a pretty bitter pill to swallow for the older gamers, but those weaned in an increasingly all digital era where nothing is ever truly "owned," it's just another sign that ownership is a twentieth century concept that's slowly being phased out. In the end however, Internet rage (or maybe just shocking low pre-orders on the Xbox One) prevailed and a week later, Microsoft stunned everyone by almost totally reversing its DRM stance and following meekly in Sony's wake.

It's clear to see that change is coming as the companies gear up for their big marketing pushes going into the holiday season, but that's not to say that everything old is bad or obsolete now. There's still plenty of life kicking in the current generation and *The Last of Us* is one of the best examples of what can be done on old hardware once all of its nuances are fully understood. It's a testament to the gaming industry's obsession with cinematic narrative, but it's not the only way to tell a story and we have a great piece examining the other ways that games can create a narrative without resorting to movie conventions. This is also a big time for the other great geek past times of comics and we have a great primer for people out there that are looking to jump into some comics for the summer but don't know where to start.

Summer is here, and with it, a boat load of new stuff to play, read or watch. So kick back, enjoy this issue of CGM and then enjoy the long summer days with whatever game or comic is begging for your attention next.

Wayne Santos
Senior Content Editor

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With an increase in connectivity, Tim examines how the last eight years of playing our Xbox 360s and PS3s could be thought of as two distinct generations.

Six months in and here's what our resident comic expert Nicole thinks of as the best in class. See how you agree or disagree with this running list of the best comics of 2013.

Marvel has brought out the big guns... but DC is no slouch in the box office blockbuster arena either. Phil looks at how, and why, DC can build its own cinematic universe.

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CULTURE

Playing with Words
Text adventures are coming back

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Theatre of the Mind
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Finding Springtime
Games championing social causes

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PLAYING WITH WORDS

Twine and the Resurgence of Text Games

Words by Reid McCarter

You are a ghost who has just been assigned the task of haunting a house. You have to terrify the occupants to the point that they vacate their new home. How you accomplish this is up to you. Will you cause the walls to bleed? Will you appear as an unearthly apparition in the dark? Or will you make horrifying noises emanate from the refrigerator?

Following through with any of these choices yields immediate results that cause Kitty Horrorshow's Stygia to branch out in different ways. Like many of the best videogames, Stygia is both imaginative and capable of giving players control over a life not their own. That it is a game developed with Twine and presented almost entirely through text makes little difference to its success.

***

Twine is a free development tool that allows creative types with little technical knowledge to make games. The games themselves usually consist of nothing more than text, embedded links and maybe a few pictures or accompanying multimedia touches like music and basic animations. The resulting game resembles a twenty first century take on Bantam Books' Choose Your Own Adventure series: a playthrough involves reading bits of text, selecting choices from a list and seeing how following these divergent paths ultimately affects the direction of the story.

Though these games sound simple enough, their level of complexity is limited only by the ambitions of designers. A workable Twine game can go from idea to publicly accessible in a day. It can also take months or years of work to execute on a concept that is larger in scale. This is important because, regardless of scope, Twine gives anyone with the desire to make a game the ability to do so. The software's visual layout allows developers to lay out branching story paths on a "node map" that show how specific text choices lead to varying outcomes (Twine does allow for coding through a command line interface called Twee, but using traditional programming languages isn't a requirement) and exports finished games as lightweight websites that can be hosted on free blogging platforms like Wordpress or Blogger. With a budget computer, an Internet connection and the determination to follow through on an idea, it's possible to make a videogame out of nothing more than an interesting idea and a bit of determination.

It is for these reasons that Twine has become such a hot topic. The incredible potential inherent to an easily accessible development tool like Twine is allowing a wide variety of amateur developers a simple way to add their perspectives to the medium. Since the tool allows anyone to learn how to craft a videogame of their own without requiring time spent studying programming languages or the ability to craft visual and sound assets, Twine is attracting a large body of enthusiasts who, despite loving games, may not otherwise have ever created one on their own.

***

In developer/writer Anna Anthropy's *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, the author argues (very passionately and very well) that simpler game making tools will lead to a medium that better represents a wide variety of perspectives. Anthropy's wish (and I think this may be a

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common dream) is for videogames to continue falling outside of the control of the traditional publishing system that is responsible for ensuring that so many of the industry's highest profile titles resemble bland summer blockbuster films. Why should most big budget games be science fiction, fantasy or military stories starring straight white men swinging swords and shooting guns when so many people would be interested in exploring other kinds of gameplay? Because the traditional publisher-funded videogame is so expensive and is, to varying degrees, presided over by financiers instead of creatives, very few games within the mainstream system are capable of broadening the medium.

Anthropy points to the availability of easier game creation tools as the method by which this will change. The availability of systems that allow non-programmers to craft videogames of their own makes it possible for everyone to express their ideas, not just the professional designers with salaries, focus tests and shareholders to keep in mind. Already we can see Twine making this hope for a widening of gameplay experiences into a reality. A quick look at a few outstanding Twine titles helps to illustrate how this is already happening.

j chastain's's *rat chaos* is a surrealist adventure that places the player in the role of a spaceship captain who can choose to unleash "rat chaos" and speak to New Rat City, Avatar of Rats at the beginning of the story. While the disorienting introduction seems like it is nothing more than (entertaining) nonsense, New Rat City quickly begins a torrent of self-loathing talk that provides very real insight into issues like depression and bullying. In *Howling Dogs* developer Porpentine uses a frame narrative – the player character lives in a small room, eating and drinking from a nutrient dispenser and entering an "activity room" to engage with increasingly bizarre story scenarios – to weave a dense, poetic tale of escapism, frustration and despair. *Weird Tape in the Mail* by Adam Dickinson is a Cronenberg style nightmare that contrasts visceral depictions of the human body with the false comforts of consumerism. The player is greeted by often revolting MS Paint images of a malignant-looking uncle, their own mysteriously blemished legs and "the festering mound" that lies at the core of the plot. Jasmine Choinski's *Circa Regna Tonat* portrays the execution of Anne Boleyn from multiple viewpoints, describing the historic scene through a combination of emotionally stirring prose and choice-based gameplay that changes how the event is seen by its witnesses, but not necessarily its outcome. *Sacrilege*, by Rock Paper Shotgun/PC Gamer/Unwinnable's Cara Ellison, makes the player choose from a group of sex partners amidst a delirious nightclub scene rendered in sparse text and neon webpage backgrounds. Ellison explores game-

Why should most big budget games be science fiction, fantasy or military stories starring straight white men swinging swords and shooting guns when so many people would be interested in exploring other kinds of gameplay?

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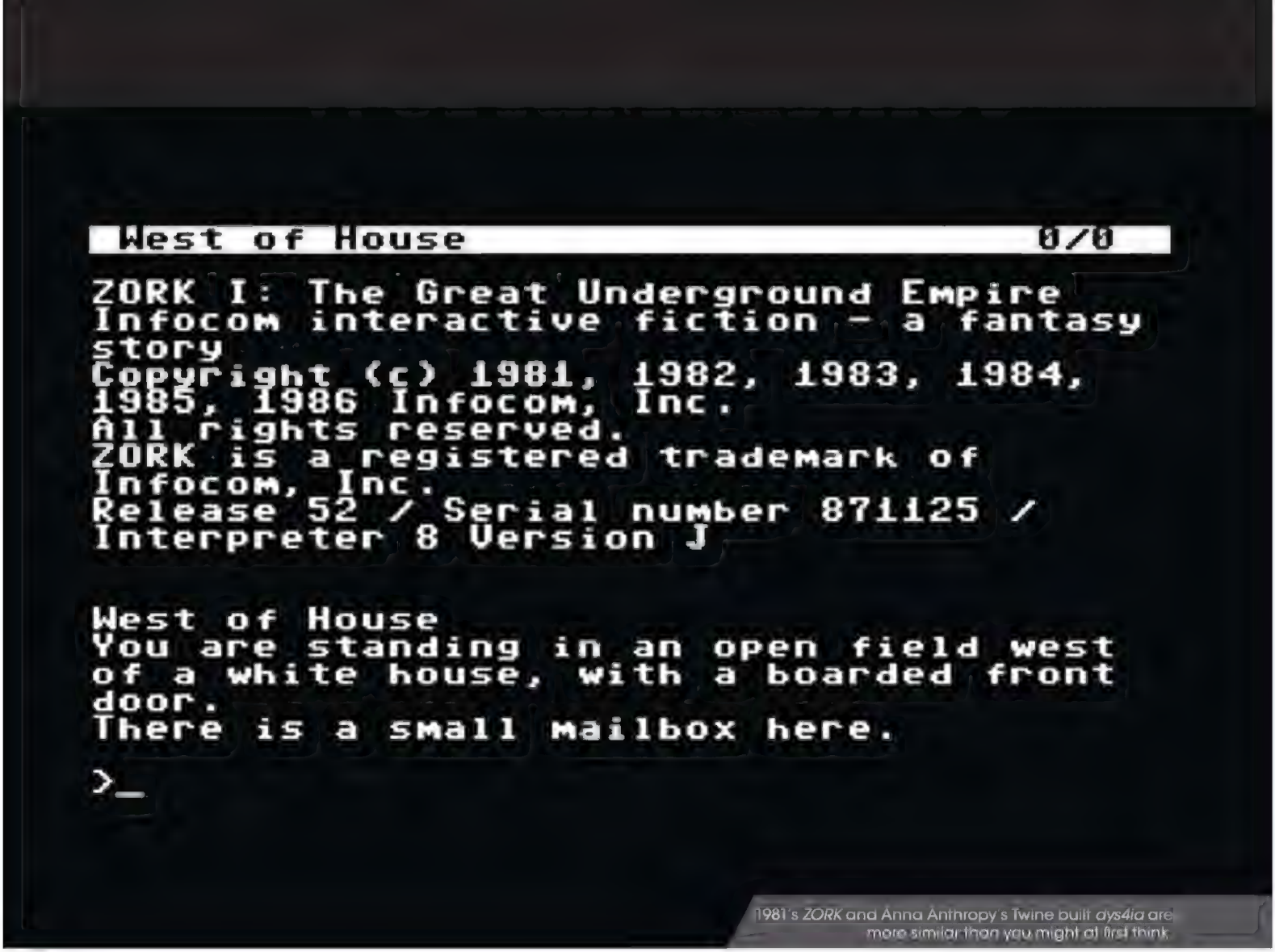

West of House 0/0
ZORK I: The Great Underground Empire
Infocom interactive fiction - a fantasy story
Copyright (c) 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986 Infocom, Inc.
All rights reserved.
ZORK is a registered trademark of Infocom, Inc.
Release 52 / Serial number 871125 / Interpreter 8 Version J
West of House
You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door.
There is a small mailbox here.
>_

1981's *ZORK* and Anna Anthropy's Twine built *dys4ia* are more similar than you might at first think

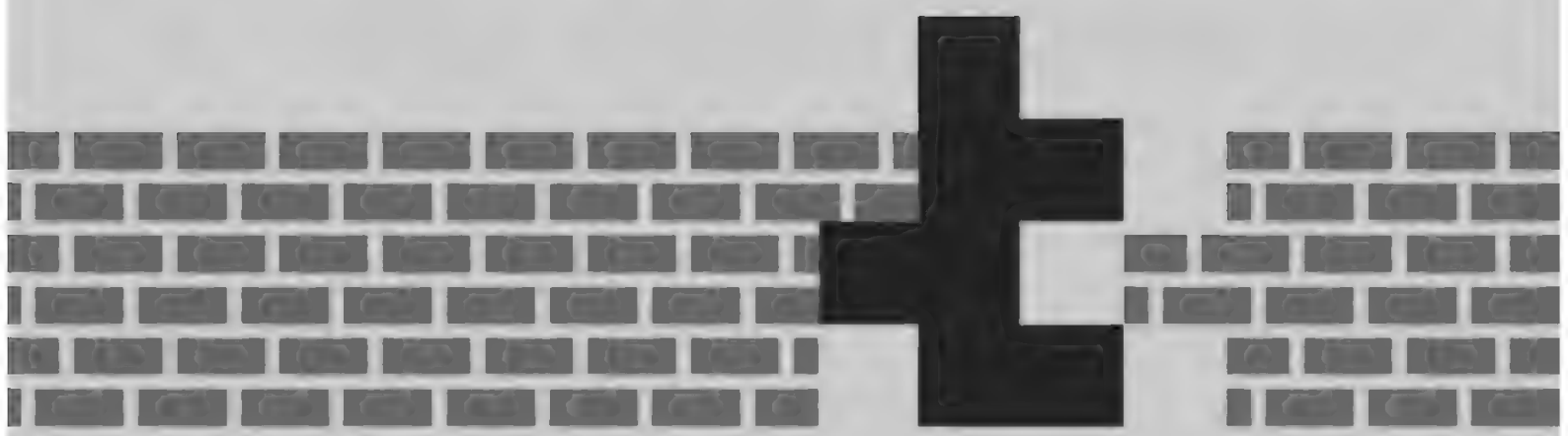
play and choice-based mechanics to unpack a relatively small life experience into something much bigger than the game itself, and more profound.

While only a small sampling of games, these titles all offer insights into the human experience that mainstream game development studios would not — and often cannot — introduce to their releases. chastain's rat chaos could never be a multimillion dollar project with advertising money and a boxed release. It likely wouldn't even be the passion project of a small indie team working for themselves over a long period of time. Because it was possible to make a game quickly in Twine, though, a fascinating experiment like rat chaos was made and released for others to enjoy.

***

Those who dismiss Twine games because the prospect of playing through an entirely text-based game seems either unexciting or too much like reading may want to consider the incredible debt that modern videogames owe to older titles based entirely around playing with words. *Zork*, a game created in the late 1970s by the group of MIT programmers who would go on to found Infocom, helped lay the foundation for the text-only interactive fiction that would eventually inspire the still relevant genres of digital role-playing and point-and-click adventure games. In it and other text adventures players navigate worlds that function much like both of these genres. As technology advanced and computers became capable of rendering more sophisticated audiovisual scenes, it grew to be possible to actually illustrate the monster fighting, labyrinth exploring and puzzle solving that was traditionally left to the player's imagination. Despite a huge change in aesthetics the games themselves remained much the same.

Black Isle Studio's beloved *Planescape: Torment*, a computer RPG held up by many as one of the finest marriages of story and gameplay, is essentially a Twine game with a lousy combat system bolted onto it. *Torment* may open with a computer animated cutscene, audiovisual indications of the environment and the ability to click around the screen, but it is also typical of many classic RPGs in that it tells its story almost entirely through blocks of descriptive text and branching dialogue choices. Beloved adventure games running on LucasArts' SCUMM scripting language (*Maniac Mansion*, *The Secret of Monkey Island*, etc.) work in a similar way. Rather than ask the player to type a command or pick from a list of text choices to influence a scene, however, these titles allowed the shortcut of graphical interfaces.



THOSE OF US WHO WANT TO SEE GAMES CONTINUE TO MOVE INTO BOLDER, WEIRDER NEW TERRITORIES SHOULD BE VERY EXCITED ABOUT WHAT TWINE REPRESENTS.

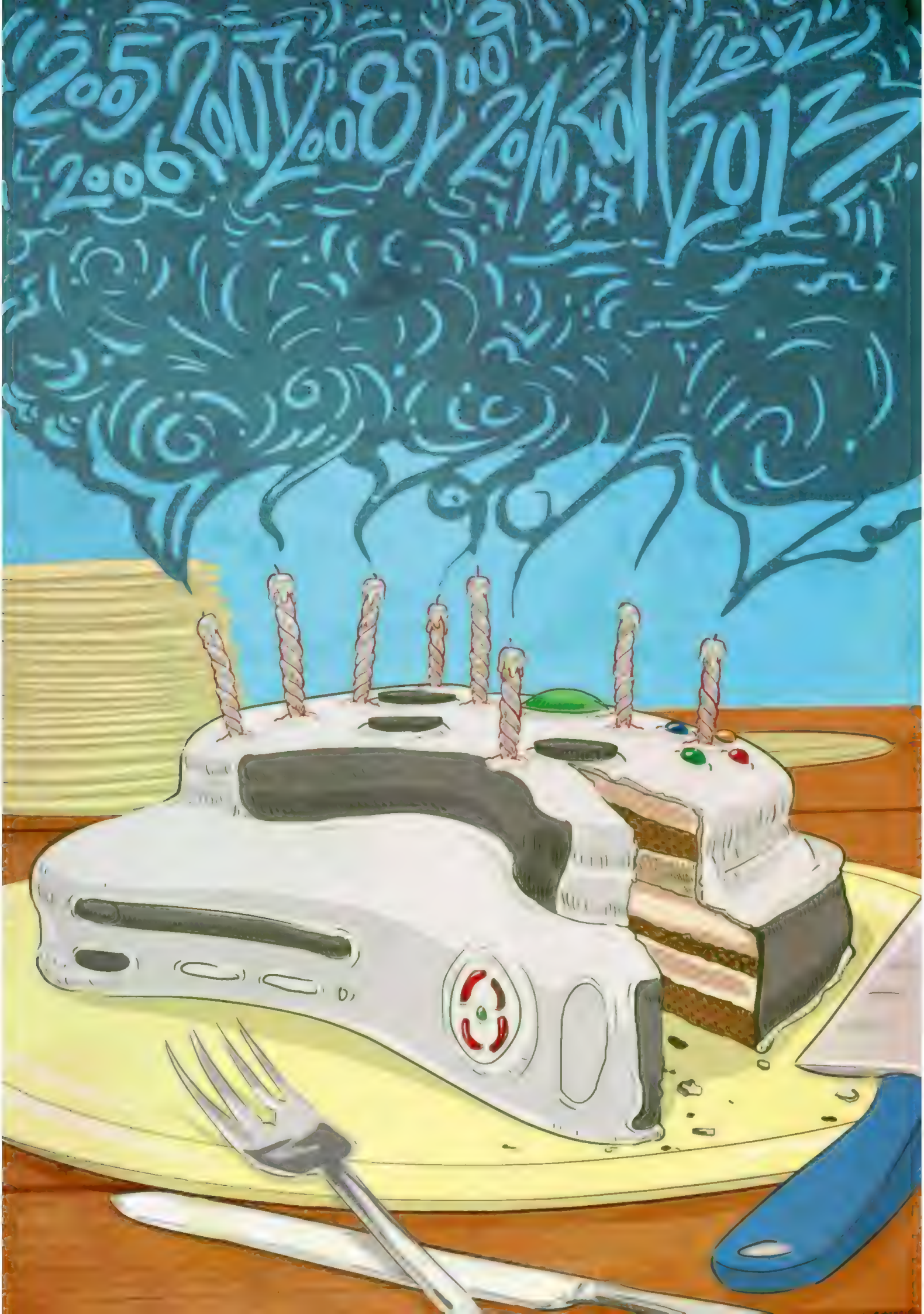
Just the same, the bulk of these games was presented through text and simple images, bringing players into the experience through audiovisual flair only slightly more impressive than what can be found in the typical Twine game.

This isn't an isolated example. The legacy of the earliest text-based games is still felt in the medium today. Some of the most satisfying moments of more recent BioWare blockbusters like the *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* series—games with beautifully rendered sound, music and gameplay design—are completely text-based. The addition of voice acting and character models to these segments make the game look more impressive, yet represents only a minor step up from the text adventures of the past in the grand scheme of videogame evolution.

The trappings of modern games may have changed, but the roots of many contemporary releases still run right back to the text adventure and text-based RPG. If the limited nature of Twine aesthetics is paralleled with the minimalist design of early videogames, it may be easier to appreciate the tool for what it is: an exciting, though somewhat limited step toward something bigger. Twine, an easily accessible development resource that is already capable of facilitating such creative games, will only be supplanted by more sophisticated tools in the future. When these amateur-friendly development systems do arrive they will only continue in the democratizing vein of Twine, giving talented non-programmers a way to express their ideas in ever more impressive ways.

Twine games may not appeal to everyone, but the role they play in broadening the videogame medium is unquestionable. Mainstream videogame development is only becoming more and more expensive, requiring publishers to greenlight only the most risk-averse titles in order to avoid gambling with huge sums of money. Increasingly powerful hardware, capable of rendering increasingly detailed sights and sounds, doesn't come cheap. This trend, as evidenced by the nature of both Microsoft and Sony's new consoles, doesn't seem to be lessening in the mainstream.

Those of us who want to see games continue to move into bolder, weirder new territories should be very excited about what Twine represents. Modestly created text games may seem like an unlikely avenue for experiencing some of the most fascinating titles in modern videogames, but the fact that their simplicity allows nearly anyone to make them means that, at least for the time being, these games will offer the most innovative play in the industry. CG


2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012

The 8 Year Generation

ILLUSTRATION BY JO ENGLE

The videogame industry is more cyclical than other industries out there. With each new set of gaming hardware comes an entirely new generation of games. I find it interesting that unlike any other entertainment industry the videogame industry essentially gets to hit the "reset" button every few years and claim "Okay we're gonna do this again but better." By "better" most developers mean bigger projects that utilize all the new little bells and whistles of the new hardware. Typically this means bigger more detailed worlds in which gamers can continue to right wrongs, slay beasts, and save the world. It also means new impressive features. This past generation saw the introduction of motion controls, massive online connectivity, and the rise of the casual and downloadable markets. Over the past eight years gamers have actually seen all sorts of innovations that would have been impossible during the Xbox/PS2 era but with the industry on the brink of this latest generation I can't help but wonder if we even need new consoles? There's still plenty of life left in the Xbox 360 and PS3 but that won't stop companies like Sony and Microsoft from going back to the trenches and starting a whole new war for your money.

War. War never changes. Well, maybe a little.

Most people would say that this past gaming generation spanned eight years but I would disagree. The past eight years have actually been made up of two generations. After the first five years instead of getting a whole new set of consoles what we got were significant console re-designs. Now the internal hardware didn't change much, most PS3s bought today contain the same basic chips that were present when the console was launched but if you look at the functionality the PS3 and Xbox 360 are drastically different than they were when they first hit the market. In addition to the physical redesign that both consoles received around 2009/10 both consoles have enjoyed numerous firmware updates that changed how people interacted with their gaming consoles. This iterative design served to prolong the seventh generation while developers continued to work on the eighth generation consoles we now know as the PS4, Xbox One, and the Wii U. Also around 2009/10 we saw the PS3 and 360 adopt motion controllers that were popularized by the Nintendo Wii. PlayStation introduced the world to the PS Move and Microsoft took dancing in your living room to a whole new level with Kinect. Neither really seemed to resonate with hardcore

gamers but the efforts did have some interesting implications. The PS Move paved the way for interesting augmented reality experiences like Wonderbook while the Kinect really found a home with fitness and dancing games like *Nike+* and Harmonix's *Dance Central* series. You'll notice that both motion controllers resulted in more than just waggle controls which seemed to get stale after only a few years of Wii games. So instead of the eight year long seventh generation what we really got was a five year generation followed by another three years of updated functionality. Which means the Xbox One and PS3 belong in the ninth generation but since the industry doesn't agree it looks like we're calling this the eighth generation . That said, I think this will be the last full generational reset we'll see for a very long time. Since both Sony and Microsoft and iterated constantly on the PS3 and 360 respectively it would be pretty safe to assume that they plan to do the same with the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. Who knows how we'll be interacting with these machines come 2015? Or even what each box will look like? In fact, those questions bring me to a final big take away from this generation. As we get all excited and sweaty with anticipation for what's new and exciting, try not to get too hot and bothered about DRM, mandatory online connections and the attempted erosion of the used game market. If something isn't working or proves to be a huge hindrance

So instead of the eight year long seventh generation what we got was a five year generation followed by three years of updated functionality.

for the user base, most companies will at least attempt to change things. That is, unless gamers keep funnelling money in their direction. In which case you'll have to sleep in the bed you've made. Gamers have the most powerful tool in the industry at their disposal, their debit/credit card. As we've seen time and time again companies will not spend money to develop games that nobody buys. If you want strong narrative and art direction support games like *The Walking Dead* and *Journey*. If you want s'plosions and lots of shooty shooty bang bang then keep on buying *Call of Duty* games. The power is yours. Curious as to why Sony keeps snatching up those darling little indie titles? It's because people buy them in droves. Show indie and quality developers some money love and watch them shower you with games.

Swan Songs and Celebrations.

With the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 down for the count but certainly not out we're starting to see this generation's swan songs. Games like *BioShock Infinite* and the recently released *The Last of Us* are fantastic examples of how far currently available technology can be pushed. But can we really go any further? Well Quantic Dream may think so but so do the developers at Rockstar North. *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Beyond* may serve as serve as the generation's final hoorah. The developers at Rockstar North are known for pushing all sorts of envelopes and the massive world of *GTA* is one that is normally full to bursting. Plus with the game's three intertwining stories, its seems to be one of the most ambitious narratives ever attempted by the developers in Edinburgh. *GTA V* is not only one of

the most anticipated games of this year but it's also one of the most anticipated titles of this generation. Quantic Dream pushes boundaries in a different way. The French studio is known for its gripping and dark games which blur the line between cinema and interactive software. *Beyond: Two Souls* furthers that direction by casting film actors to act and voice their characters, a trick recently picked up by *Metal Gear* creator Hideo Kojima. *Beyond: Two Souls* and *GTA V* will definitely leave their mark on the closing months of the current generation. We've come a long way from the NES swan song that was *Wario's Woods* and to be sure this generation is going out with some of the best games ever.

But it ain't over yet.

Without question, gamers are eager to get their hands on one or two of the fancy new consoles but don't be so quick to stash that PS3/360 in the closet just yet. Microsoft announced that they are not only going to continue to release games for the Xbox 360 into 2014 but they're also giving some great games from this past generation away to Xbox Live Gold Members. They're not slouches; both *Assassin's Creed II* and *Halo 3* are the first two titles to be confirmed. Now to be fair, chances are most gamers have already stabbed and blasted their way through both those title but if you've never played either title than this is your perfect opportunity. However, Sony is still king of free games and they will continue to release games to PSN+ subscribers and announced that the PSN+ service will be rolled over to the PS4. But there are still some great looking games like *Beyond: Two Souls*, *Rain* and something called *Diablo III* which I'm told is a big deal. With so much going on with these two platforms it's not surprising that a few gamers out there aren't quite ready to start carting their PS3/X360 to the thrift store. CG

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THEATRE OF THE MIND

How games give us the tools to make our own stories

Words by Seán O'Sullivan
Illustration by Scott Dixon

I hesitate before giving the final order. The enemy ship hasn't returned fire for two minutes now, and the video-screens shows a sole survivor battling a raging fire on the only part of his craft that still has oxygen. The futility is touching; because of the hubris of his now-long dead superiors, this poor soul has been offered asphyxiation or immolation, so he's just keeping busy until the inevitable. My weapons crew tells me that the Heavy Lasers are ready. I tell them to fire, and seconds later explosions reverberate through the vessel opposite us, scattering debris everywhere: the last man standing is just another speck of space detritus. "It was a mercy killing", I tell my crew, hoping that they don't think about how easily that could be us.

That encounter happened in last year's indie-hit *FTL: Faster Than Light*, a spaceship simulation roguelike, which sports a simplistic graphical presentation that could be pulled off with Super Nintendo hardware. It's an entertaining, emotionally engaging game that runs on very modest hardware. Most of those details aren't in the game, it's just an example of a typical thought process that I go through while playing it. *FTL* is a great example to bear in mind as Microsoft and Sony try trot out various creators and have them gush about how gaming is about to get better by every metric once we buy their expensive new consoles that now sport more transistors than the crap we're used to.

At the PS4 event, vague promises were made about what kind of benefits gamers should come to expect from the extra horsepower, with David Cage heralding the new generation of hardware as "finally" granting developers with the power to deliver emotionally evocative experiences. Cage triumphantly presented the growing number of polygons per character model in his previous games, before unveiling a realistically rendered floating-head tech-demo. It was an impressive artistic undertaking, but it didn't support Cage's conclusion that "now we are only limited by our imagination".

The games that are the most successful at tapping into my emotions are the ones that rely on my imagination and molded by the gameplay. Back to the example of *FTL*: the narrative framework is provided by a terse paragraph at the start of the game, but the gameplay mechanics, in which you're pursued by a fleet of enemy ships, instill a sense of urgency independent of story motivation. Death in *FTL* is affecting because of a core design pillar - if your ship goes down, your game is over, and you must start afresh with a new crew. As a result, even when you're killing to survive, it's easy to find yourself taking pity on the tiny-sprites with their simplistic animation as you snuff them out.

One of Cage's intentions is to "make you feel emotion that you have never felt in your life". One game that successfully presented me with a new sensation was another of last year's indie smash hits: *Hotline Miami*. To play *Hotline Miami* is to experience a psychotic, homicidal trance, and it achieves this without the need of volumetric lighting and 3D depth of field. This is another 2D, top-down action game with a style congruent with the hits from the 90s, and it's able to affect one's mental state by controlling and emphasising key parts of the experience. The story is intentionally disorienting, the combat is incredibly simple, and the sound effects

Gameplay design provides the framework that sets the stage for the theatre of the mind, and that's where the magic happens.

are secondary to the thumping dance soundtrack. An instant restart mechanic entices recklessness, and the combo-system compels the player onwards to crack more skulls. Each mission ends with the final enemy slain, at which point the music stops, and the player must trudge back to the beginning of the level, with the eerie calm jarring the player back into cogency as he surveys the aftermath of his frenzy. It's a game that frayed my emotions and prompted unusual physiological reactions - I would tense up as I made insane charges at my victims, and revel in the gory, pixellated feedback from defeated foes.

'Immersion' is a buzzword that's thrown around wantonly by game developers, often while trying to push the value of greater graphical fidelity. Cage's lofty goal is to make gamers forget that they're playing a game, and he implies that the graphics will facilitate this, but the artifice of using input devices mean that's not going to happen anytime soon. One of the most immersive games I've ever played is *Fallout 3*: it's buggy, it's goofy, and some of its mechanics make no sense, but its world is so densely packed with activity and variety that it's possible to lose yourself for hours on end.

Ultimately, one of the most effective methods to tap into the player's imagination may well be to allow them to express themselves however they see fit. Fans of MMO *EVE Online* stick with it because the game doesn't present you with some content to explore or grind through, but rather empowers you to assert your own will over the world and its inhabitants. *EVE's* greatest stories and historic events have little to do with the team that made the game, but rather the players who collude, betray, and start wars with fellow players and factions. A recent skirmish kicked off by a high-ranked player warping to a low-security part of space, which snowballed into an epic spacewar with over 3,000 players taking part. *EVE's* complexity can be off-putting for newcomers, but those with the patience and the ambition to make a mark on the world are able to do so, and it's not uncommon to see their feats chronicled in the mainstream gaming press.

Another vector for capturing the gamer's imagination is a punishing but fair game design. *Dark Souls* caught on with players, ostensibly for the unforgiving difficulty that demands a considerable amount of care and diligence to succeed, reinforced with a punishing death mechanic. Every piece of visual and aural information is much more potent when the game requires the amount of attention that *Dark Souls* does, and even though this approach puts off many gamers who don't want to invest effort in their game, it resonates deeply with enough people that enemy encounters become thrilling anecdotes that they regale their friends with.

I'm aware that I'm mostly attacking a straw-man; David Cage and his cohorts are trying to get gamers excited, and graphical improvements are the most immediately noticeable things about a new generation of consoles, but it's a little insulting to correlate graphical richness with richer experiences. One of the most heart-wrenching moments from recent blockbuster cinema was courtesy of Pixar's animated feature *Up*, in which a lengthy, dialogue-free montage unfurled the lifelong trials and tribulations of a couple in love. It was admittedly gorgeous, and created on machines a few orders of magnitude more powerful than consumer-level playthings, but the stylized look and cartoony world served to enhance the emotional impact, rather than impair it.

I'm not saying I'm not in favour of increased power - many of this console generation's best experiences wouldn't have been possible on old hardware - but the hyperbole surrounding each new advance just makes me distrustful of the people peddling it. Games aren't like movies - you can't always direct a player's gaze, and an overreliance on cutscenes to provide motivation is only going to arouse impatience and frustration. There are many ways to capture a gamer's imagination, but it's my observation that the gameplay design provides the framework that sets the stage for the theatre of the mind, and that's where the magic happens. C&G

WorldMarketing

Finding Springtime

Words by Zoya Street / Illustrations by Sandy Vazan

When I hear about game developers trying to tackle the problems faced by teenagers, my initial reaction is bored cynicism. I imagine well-meaning middle-aged suits musing, 'maybe we'll catch their attention with a videogame! Kids love those.'

As always, the reality is more diverse than my preconceptions. Game developers are trying different approaches to give support to teenagers that then often never received themselves. And while some attempts can come out corny and ill-conceived, others are elegant and artful.

We're looking at how we can get gameplay where the player will feel what it is to be in that type of situation.

Silent Enemy

Minority Media, the indie studio behind domestic abuse story *Papo y Yo*, recently announced that they are working on another game that tackles a serious issue. *Silent Enemy* will explore the theme of bullying.

"The premise of the *Silent Enemy* is that you are on a quest to find Springtime, but there are these bullies, [represented by] crows, that try to hinder you,"

In the teaser trailer video, development team members hold up signs bearing the message 'I was bullied'. The project aims to highlight the universal nature of a very lonely experience, as programmer Paul DiMarco explained:

'Bullying is an issue that has affected everyone. I feel that pretty much everybody is in three categories: either you bullied someone, you were bullied, or you sat on the side and watched. We're looking at how we can get gameplay where the player will feel what it is to be in that type of situation.'

Silent Enemy is not a public service broadcast aimed at patronisingly conferring positive messages to The Youth. It is a project that speaks to the lived emotions of the developers themselves, a collaborative work of art that draws on a painful experience that many people have lived through, be that as teenagers or as adults.

It is perhaps this understanding of the bullying's ubiquity that led them to canvas their own fans for inspiration about how *Silent Enemy* should tackle the issue. In April, they took to Twitter to ask: "In your opinions, what does a game addressing bullying require to treat the subject constructively and respectfully?"

"Our own culpability", responded one fan. "We all talk about how we were bullied. Everyone was bullied. But do you remember times when you had been mean to someone? I mean, what happens to the bullies? Sometimes they grow up to be wretched bully adults, but sometimes they might be us. Sometimes we privately (or, heck, out loud) tell people 'I wish I could go back and fix it, or stop myself.'"

Many others drew attention to the role of 'herd mentality' in facilitating bullying. Perhaps the visual imagery of bullies as crows – who often move in flocks – will allow this game to represent the spectre of bullying as a dark crowd looming above the protagonist.

Someone else asked for the game to bring serious clo-

sure to the issues it raises. "I'd like to see actual remedies be addressed. Appropriate remediation for the bully and helping the victim to cope and heal."

One of the most impressive aspects of Minority's *Papo y Yo* was their ability to complexly imagine how marginalised people seek out empowerment through videogames and other forms of escapism.

"We want to make games that help you cope with reality. It is not about escaping," said Vander Caballero in a recent interview.

The power of projects like this is that they are able to not just represent the pain of a difficult issue, but also give back to players the sense of control that was taken away from them. There is always a way out, and games might allow us to act out healthy coping strategies.

Truth - thetruth.com

Empowerment is the idea behind another attempt to use gaming to address serious problems. Award-winning anti-tobacco campaign 'Truth', which was launched in 2000 by US public health organisation Legacy, has begun using games to reach teenagers. It is perhaps an ideal medium for their message that there are other ways besides tobacco to feel that you are in control.

"Teenage years are a time of transition into adulthood and a quest for control. For some teens, tobacco use can fulfil the innate adolescent need to rebel ... Truth is an alternative way to meet that need for control; by empowering teenagers to rebel by not smoking."

Truth's latest game is a location-based social game that involves tagging virtual environments with graffiti. *Graffiti Collective* is Truth's third game, and through augmented reality and an in-app tag designer it gives players the ability to make their mark on a virtual copy of their environment.

The idea is certainly compelling in theory, and it is based on a real story; tobacco companies really did pay off street artists to spray subliminal messages on the walls of major US cities. Players collaborate to cover these messages with their own, while also building up their personal territory on the local map. The message is clear: smoking is no way to show your individuality, and it only puts you under someone else's control.

Graffiti Collective runs the gamut of mobile games buzzwords, with user-generated content, location-based gaming, augmented reality and a closely integrated social layer. Unfortunately, this doesn't translate into an enjoyable gameplay experience. The process of creating tags is tedious, the results are not attractive, and I feel frightened for the hypothetical teenager taking an iPad onto the street to gawk through it for the AR feature.

It is risky and ambitious to take on innovative new technologies that have not yet been integrated into successful games. It's a shame that a project with such good intentions fails as a game.

Beyond the Final Boss - beyondthefinalboss.org

If gaming does speak to an adolescent sense of disempowerment, then that may be even more true of the practice of game development itself. Being able to manipulate computers and virtual worlds to create something new, and to then share that thing with other people, is surely a great antidote to the isolation and powerlessness of being bullied.

Beyond the Final Boss is not a game, but a project run by game developers to aspiring teenage gamers going through the pain of bullying. Through a huge collection of interviews with the developers behind people's favourite games, the site send out the message: 'We were bullied, but then we won. You can win too.'

In *Silent Enemy*, the metaphorical resonance of 'finding springtime' is powerful, because the experience of being bullied can leave you feeling so lifeless. By framing bullying in terms of the seasons, it grounds the experience in the knowledge that this time will pass.

That is also the explicit message of Beyond the Final Boss, which includes in its set of questions for game developers who experienced bullying the chance to highlight how great their life is now that they've escaped bullying and found Springtime in their chosen career.

"Yes I had an interest in games but no one ever said I could work in that industry ... I've had to work very hard to get where I am today and I think being bullied as a youth has given me that extra drive to succeed," answers Steven Barber, who works in Developer Relations at Sony.

Vlambeer's Rami Ismail encourages readers to believe in their own power to create great things: "The reason you're being bullied isn't because you're different – it's because your bullies can't deal with that. You, unlike them, have the ability to see the world through a perspective most people could never see. That gives you the capability to do amazing things, to see the world in a different way, to achieve things no one would ever think of."

It is particularly touching that a medium so often blamed for encouraging extraordinary violence can in fact act as a powerful way out of the enduring effects of the violence that happens in schools every day. Shahid Ahmad reflects, '[for] the people who make all kinds of videogames, a childhood in which violence was inflicted on them has resulted in a flowering of creativity, character, calm, peace and success that is truly inspiring.' The empowerment people find in games does not need to come at the expense of someone else.

Games give people strength not just by satisfying a need to be in control; game development itself is for many people a way into a better life than they could have ever imagined when they were being bullied. Perhaps games studios don't have to partner with public health organisations to do good in the world. Maybe being true to the emotional significance of games is enough. CG

INDUSTRY

Revelling in the Reveal
Another E3, another new generation

The Road to the Next Generation
How things have changed

The Future of Gaming
Two screens are better than one, right?

Building the DC cinematic Universe
Doing the League justice.

Top 5 Superman comics
Here's the best of the Man of Steel

Blackberry and the Future of Gaming
How Blackberry is winning back gamers

Coming Home
Ben River talks *Home* a year after release

Sheltered
Creators of *Sheltered* explain the apocalypse

Behind Marvel's Massive Loot Fest
David Brevik's games just seem to *click* with us

The State of Comics - Summer 2013
Nicole updates us on the best things in comics

E3

REVELLING IN THE REVEAL

Words by Wayne Santos

Change is in the air at the conclusion of E3 2013, but it's not just the natural rhythm of market change expected in a transitional year to a new console generation. Aside from the twilight of the seventh console generation, there's the rise of new gaming platforms, most notably mobile, and perhaps most surprising of all, a changing of the guard in the ongoing rivalry between Sony and Microsoft. But that's getting ahead of ourselves, it's better to go back to the beginning.

Microsoft

As is grand old E3 tradition, the "Big Three" as well the big publishers got their major announcements out of the way the day before the expo got under way. Microsoft started things off in the morning with a press conference that could—at best—be described as a Pyrrhic victory. They brought the games, some of them surprising, desirable exclusives, such as *Titanfall* or the unexpected *D4* by Swery *"Deadly Premonition" 65*, but the sweetness of the strong game line up was soured by the past announcement of the controversial DRM policies as well as the conference announcement that the Xbox One would be selling for $499 at launch. There's an argument to be made here that Microsoft might have "won" E3 if their presentation were being judged entirely on the line up of games. They really brought out some impressive titles, including *Spark*, an obvious riff on *LittleBigPlanet's* game creation functionality but writ even larger and more comprehensive. *Forza 5* is also set to impress and by default, its Xbox One roots will make it far more visually impressive than *Gran Turismo 6* set to launch on the PS3. The expected trailer for a new *Halo* game was also bound to create warm, fuzzy dudebro feelings, although why Master Chief feels the need to wear tattered robes on top of battle armour is going to be discussed and argued for months.

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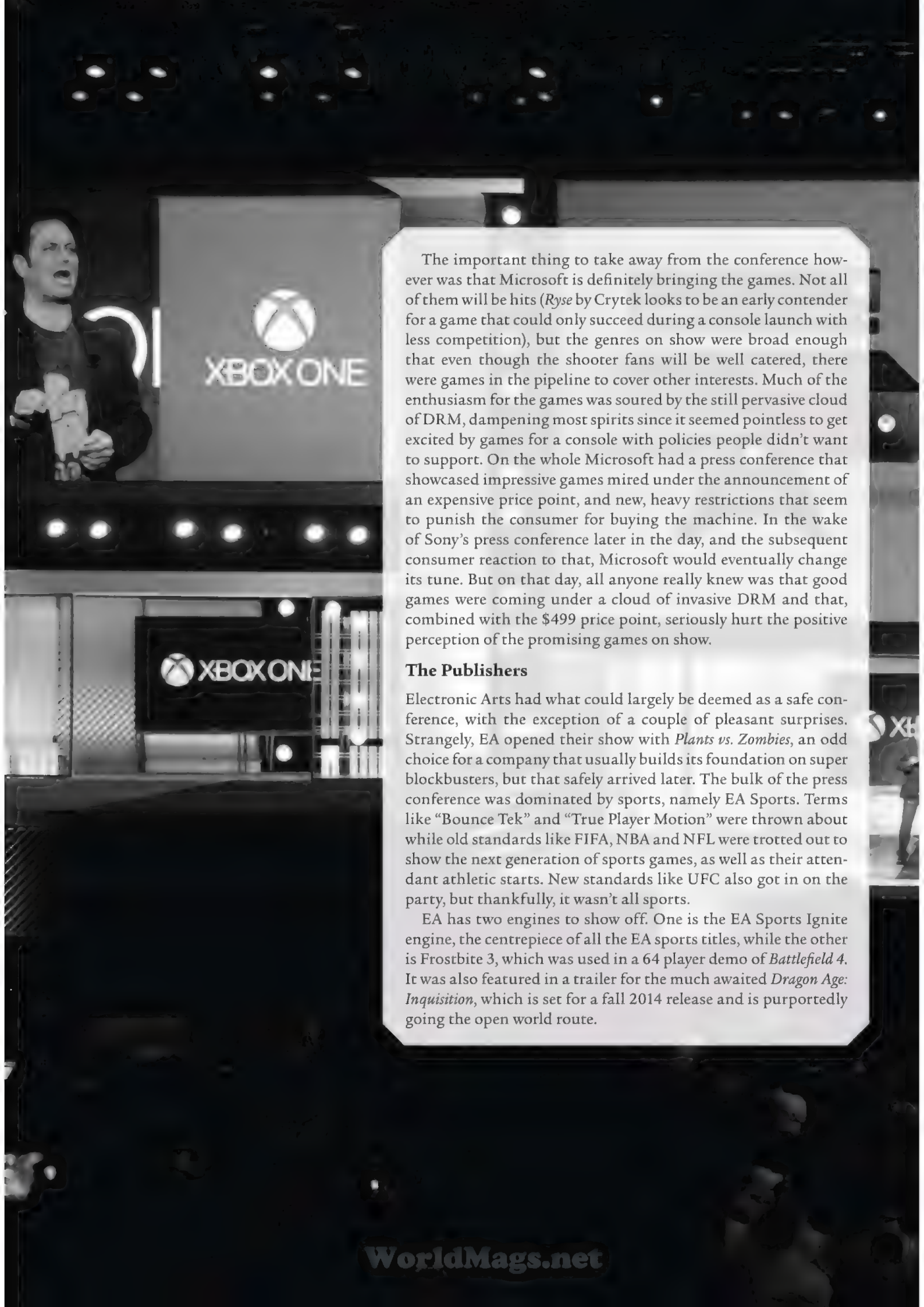

The important thing to take away from the conference however was that Microsoft is definitely bringing the games. Not all of them will be hits (*Ryse* by Crytek looks to be an early contender for a game that could only succeed during a console launch with less competition), but the genres on show were broad enough that even though the shooter fans will be well catered, there were games in the pipeline to cover other interests. Much of the enthusiasm for the games was soured by the still pervasive cloud of DRM, dampening most spirits since it seemed pointless to get excited by games for a console with policies people didn't want to support. On the whole Microsoft had a press conference that showcased impressive games mired under the announcement of an expensive price point, and new, heavy restrictions that seem to punish the consumer for buying the machine. In the wake of Sony's press conference later in the day, and the subsequent consumer reaction to that, Microsoft would eventually change its tune. But on that day, all anyone really knew was that good games were coming under a cloud of invasive DRM and that, combined with the $499 price point, seriously hurt the positive perception of the promising games on show.

The Publishers

Electronic Arts had what could largely be deemed as a safe conference, with the exception of a couple of pleasant surprises. Strangely, EA opened their show with *Plants vs. Zombies*, an odd choice for a company that usually builds its foundation on super blockbusters, but that safely arrived later. The bulk of the press conference was dominated by sports, namely EA Sports. Terms like "Bounce Tek" and "True Player Motion" were thrown about while old standards like FIFA, NBA and NFL were trotted out to show the next generation of sports games, as well as their attendant athletic starts. New standards like UFC also got in on the party, but thankfully, it wasn't all sports.

EA has two engines to show off. One is the EA Sports Ignite engine, the centrepiece of all the EA sports titles, while the other is Frostbite 3, which was used in a 64 player demo of *Battlefield 4*. It was also featured in a trailer for the much awaited *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, which is set for a fall 2014 release and is purportedly going the open world route.

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In the end, EA is giving people more of what they want in the mainstream, but a few hardcore favourites are waiting for later release.

The two biggest surprises come from two quick teases. In the middle of all the Frostbite 3 talk, there was a teaser trailer that announced some kind of *Star Wars: Battlefront* game, and this was one of the rare moments in the EA press conference when the crowd unabashedly went nuts. The other moment came at the end when a teaser for a new *Mirror's Edge* game played out, though judging from the montage of Faith getting her tattoos, it looks like this might be either a prequel or a reboot of the original game. In the end, EA is giving people more of what they want in the mainstream, but a few hardcore favourites are waiting in the wings for later release.

By the middle of the day energy meters were well past the half-way point, but Ubisoft carried on, holding their press conference at their traditional venue, the Los Angeles Theater in downtown. The air conditioning was insufficient for the needs of several hundred journalists, but despite that, Aisha Tyler kept things lively, and it was Ubisoft that probably had the most innovative showing of games. Of course the old stand bys like *Assassin's Creed*, *Just Dance* and *Rayman* were all on show, but beyond that, a lot of original, new titles piqued the interest of the crowd. *Watch_Dogs* of course, continued to garner enthusiasm, but there were also games like *The Crew*, an open, online, persistent world for drivers to compete and cooperate in. At the conclusion of the presentation, there was also yet another property based in some obtuse way on Tom Clancy. This was called *The Division* and, like *Watch_Dogs* last year, was a complete surprise to the audience. The game showed off an expansive, open world, online multi-player experience that takes place days after a massive contagion has wreaked havoc across America. Players take up the mantle of a member of a military group that still has access network and drone technology for GPS navigation and heavy artillery assistance when things get hectic in the struggle against survivors of this new plague.

Sony

And finally, to end the day, there was Sony. It was all riding on them now, Microsoft had shown its hand and the audience had found it wanting. Sony's press conference didn't immediately punch the audience in the face with one hardcore game after another as Microsoft's morning show had done. Known quantities like *Killzone: Shadowfall* and *Infamous: Second Son* were glossed over, though a few new titles like *The Order: 1886* and indie games like *Transistor* were shown off to good effect. There were also announcements of new services such as a pay-per-view Live Events feature being added to existing services like Movies/Music Unlimited.

It was only in the latter half of the press conference that Sony threw down the gauntlet and made it very clear to everyone in the stadium that they were going for Microsoft's throat. The announcement of a traditional DRM policy, as we understand it today, brought about

a spontaneous explosion of cheering unlike anything seen in at an E3 press conference before. Jack Tretton, president of Sony Computer Entertainment America, then went down a laundry list of how the PS4 is unlike the Xbox One, with no constant internet connection required, no 24 hour authentication, and the ability for owners to do with their physical discs as they see fit. This was further compounded a few minutes later when Andrew House, CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment (filling Kaz Hirai's shoes once he took over the entire company), announced that the PS4 would be selling for $399. Blow by blow, the PS4 was shown to be more consumer friendly, more powerful in specs and now cheaper than its rival. In many ways, this was a reminder to older journalists of the Sony of old, when it had something to prove, and aggressively went after the Sega Saturn with its ambitious—and cheap—original PlayStation. The outpouring of support for this move was so powerful—and had such an immediate effect on pre-order sales—that Microsoft was forced to sheepishly recant their own polices and meekly follow in Sony's footsteps less than a week later, a win for gamers but a very public black eye Microsoft is still reeling over even now.

THE OUTPOURING OF SUPPORT FOR THIS MOVE WAS SO POWERFUL THAT MICROSOFT WAS FORCED TO SHEEPISHLY RECANT THEIR OWN POLICES AND MEEKLY FOLLOW IN SONY'S FOOTSTEPS LESS THAN A WEEK LATER

Titanfall, Battlefield 4, and Ryse all promise high concept triple-A experiences for the next gen.

While games are good,
Nintendo did nothing to stem
the flood of Shiny & New...

Nintendo

The next day, Nintendo took to the much smaller stage of their own booth. As had been previously announced, they were forgoing the usual big venue in favour of a smaller, more intimate affair that wasn't going to be a typical press conference. Aside from the fact that they forced the journalists to stand for an hour rather than sit, it pretty much was a typical press conference.

The most surprising thing about Nintendo's event was how meek it was. This wasn't the same Nintendo that burst forth at the Nokia theater in 2005 claiming to be a disruptive element in the industry with a bold new interface. Reggie Fils-Aime, the Nintendo America CEO did take to the stage and speak with his usual bluster, but there was far less wind in the sales this year. Nintendo talked about games, but they were appealing directly to their existing, loyal Nintendo fanbase, the ones that have stuck by them for years. They didn't make any attempt to woo back the casual gamers that got on the Nintendo train with the Wii, and they didn't try to appeal to the hardcore or even mainstream demographic that focuses on first person shooters. Nintendo had Zelda, Mario and Pikmin games, but in this regard, even these were place holders for the Mario and *Zelda* games that people really wanted. There was no *Galaxy* or new Zelda game to be seen. Instead there was a new *Super Mario 3D* and an HD port of *Legend of Zelda: Windwaker*. A few new IPs such as *The Wonderful 101* and the more recent *Bayonetta 2* made their appearances, but while these games are good, Nintendo did nothing to stem the flood of Shiny & New™ coming from Microsoft and Sony. In the year that the Wii U has enjoyed a battlefield with no other combatants, that advantage has been squandered, and now in the run up to the launch of the two consoles this holiday season, Nintendo, rather than trying to stand out with new offerings to attract the audience, is preferring to huddle up with its existing fans, keep its head low, and let the two massive new kids duke it out this Christmas for the lion's share of profit.

In the end, 2013 proved to have quite a dramatic E3. There were upsets, reversals, surprises and even some promising new titles. The only thing that was really missing was innovation. Oculus Rift, the new VR system is still waiting in the wings as it is further prototyped and developed, but aside from that, the E3 of 2013 kept up good pace, but didn't provide anything truly revolutionary. Still, it bodes well for Christmas this year as all the consoles look set to have some good games available. CG

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The Road To The Next Generation

It's Going to be a bumpy ride

Words by Wayne Santos / Illustration by Scott Dixon

It's finally happened. Press conferences have been presented, E3 has come and gone and now, finally, all three next generation consoles are known qualities. Going into 2014, households will be buying Wii Us, PlayStation 4s or Xbox Ones, but for once, every single hardware manufacturer is facing some significant challenges.

A Different Age

If we cast our minds back to 2006, the landscape of gaming was dramatically different from what it is today. Hardcore gamers were still the primary audience for the hobby, Sony was coming off two straight generations of severely one sided dominance. Their new machine was going to be their all-in-one, miracle multimedia device, a concept that would eventually find itself officially recognized by the slogan "It only does everything." Nintendo answered the growing threat to their own relevancy by ignoring the traditional arms race of "bigger, better consoles" with the Wii, defying all expectations by appealing to the casual audience. Meanwhile, Microsoft was the upstart new kid on the block, coming off a mediocre run with the original Xbox to launch the Xbox 360 and an aggressive strategy based around the idea that online play was the future and Xbox Live was the ambassador of that future.

Over the years of generation seven, things evolved. Nintendo took the world by storm not because of Mario and Link, but because of the Wii-mote and software like *Wii Fit*. Microsoft surprised everyone by grabbing the #2 spot and dominating the hearts of the North American hardcore, garnering content like early map access for *Call of Duty*, snagging former PlayStation exclusives away from Sony like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Final Fantasy* and proving that online multi-player really was the future of gaming as Xbox Live, with its $50 annual subscription, couldn't be bought fast enough by the masses. Sony on the other hand, toppled hard and fast. The PlayStation 3 at $600 for the premium model was simply too expensive for even brand loyalty to compensate, and although exclusives like *God of War* and *Uncharted* showed that while it might be the best machine on the market, that edge was not as significant as many hoped, and the exotic cell architecture of the machine ensured that third party games like *BioShock* and *Skyrim* didn't perform as well on the Sony machine as the more PC-like Xbox 360.

In an attempt to catch up to the unexpected success Nintendo enjoyed with the casual market, both Sony and Microsoft responded. Sony was less successful, with the Move system that—while accurate and precise—didn't attract many existing owners to purchase the additional peripherals. Microsoft however, with Kinect, and a massive marketing campaign that portrayed the system as half *Minority Report* half *Star Trek* with both voice and gesture interface, made impressive sales, proving to be a genuine threat to Nintendo. It also taught Microsoft that there was a much larger, more lucrative market out there than the one they had been content to court up till now.

The landscape from the sixth to seventh generation

was markedly different. Sony, the former winner, was now last. Nintendo, in a very distant second place with the GameCube was now in first, and Microsoft, who had started dead last, was now in an astonishing second place, but more importantly, had replaced Sony in North America as the defacto machine for serious, hardcore gaming.

And now it's changing again.

Generation 8

The fortunes of the various hardware manufacturers are in a state of flux. Nintendo, the leader in the past generation is now floundering. They were first out the next gen gate with the Wii U, and despite having a year-long lead, have squandered their competition free sales period; the Wii U just isn't selling. It's being outsold by the Xbox 360, the PS3 and even the original Wii. The big problem is one of audience; the Wii may have alienated the hardcore gamers, but the interface appealed to a huge casual market. People with no gaming experience could suddenly play thanks to the intuitive controls. With the Wii U, the new tablet controller brings back not just complexity, but confusion. Many average consumers thought the tablet controller itself was the Wii U, and a lot of education was required to inform unfamiliar consumers of the benefit, a far cry from the heady days of just picking up a Wii-mote while everyone from seniors to children instantly "got it." No one seemed to know who the Wii U was for, including Nintendo, as their tepid advertising has failed to hook any one demographic. Now, despite the early debut, the Wii U is largely ignored, and even critical third party publishers like Electronic Arts and Activision are slowly withdrawing support.

As the eighth generation gets underway, the Wii U is in bad shape going into the holidays. Nintendo needs to do what it's always done with its hardware; appeal to the loyal Nintendo fanbase on the legacy of classic franchises. The holy trinity of *Zelda*, *Mario* and *Metroid* games will give Nintendo the boost it needs to scrape by during the holiday period, but Nintendo still needs a casual hit, like Wii Fit was for the Wii. That game hooked millions of stay at home weight watchers who thought they could get a personal fitness trainer and forgo visits to the gym by buying a Wii. It's critical for Nintendo that they win back some of that casual Wii crowd as right now the sales of the Wii U are looking to place it dead last going into 2014 despite a one year lead.

Microsoft isn't immune to this position shift either. While their ascension to popularity wasn't as drastic as Sony's during the PlayStation/Nintendo 64 era, they did an impressive job of wounding Sony and keeping the blood going throughout this entire current generation. They launched the Xbox 360 first and it was cheaper, had a much better online infrastructure, and, perhaps most importantly, had the best versions of most third party games thanks to the easier system architecture. There were significant blunders as well; the infamous "Red Ring of Death," with its unacceptable 30 per cent failure rate hurt Microsoft's chances of an easy win. But Microsoft bet on the popularity of shooters, and games like *Gears of War* and heavy marketing to associate *Call of Duty* with the Xbox 360 made it a shooter box that dominated sales charts.

Now, however, it's a very different game. Microsoft's pre-E3 reveal in May debuted the Xbox One, and the watch words were "TV" and "Sports." Microsoft was quite deliberate about the very first reveal of the Xbox One; it wasn't aimed at gamers. Instead, this new console interfaced with existing cable set top boxes, to enhance the live TV viewing experience, add new interface options like gesture and voice, and multi-task functions like watching TV, taking a call on Skype and even playing a game. The dream of Bill Gates is finally seeing fruition with the Xbox One; this isn't a game machine, but an all-in-one PC that controls the living room in the same way Windows PCs already control the home office and study of the average home. There are three operating systems in the Xbox One and one of them is a Windows 8 kernel, and perhaps most surprising of all, the gaming headsets bundled with every Xbox 360 have been axed. Where communication amongst gamers in online multi-player was once a given for 360 owners, Microsoft is now making the bundled Kinect 2 camera the default communication device. Gamers that still want a traditional headset experience must now buy a separate accessory courtesy of Turtle Beach. Last, but not least was the controversial near miss to make gaming a primarily digital experience. The traditional game disc was to be just a delivery vehicle used for a mandatory install of the entire game to the hard drive, where the game was now authenticated to a single user's account. 24 hour online "check ins" with Xbox Live were to be mandatory and games could only be given to one person, who had to be on your friend list for 30 days. Microsoft was clearly aware of issues of piracy and used game sales and is spearheading the effort to get these factors under control. In a stunning and embarrassingly public announcement, they reversed all these policies just a week after E3. Why? Because of their chief competition.

And finally there is Sony. The PlayStation 3 was a stumble born of arrogance, costing them the lead in the console arms race, and proving that power was pointless if it couldn't be easily used. As the years passed, humility—along with a hungry, competitive edge—returned, and Sony is going back to basics and addressing the audience and industry that made them a leader in times past. The PlayStation 4 is, in some ways, the simplest of the three machines. It is focused on gaming, designed with game developer needs in mind, and while it doesn't have the multi-media hub ambitions of the Xbox One, it is, on the paper, the most powerful of the three machines, with an easy developer environment to make sure that potential is quickly tapped. Sony has lost the dominant

None of the players are safely moving into their former positions. All of them are trying something different.

position in North America, first to Nintendo, then to Microsoft, and there are good odds that even in the next generation, it's a position they won't win back.

The PlayStation 4 is a call back then, to the days of the PS2, when Sony told players "This is the machine you want to get if you're into games." It's a complete turn around from their more recent "It only does everything" marketing for the PS3, and puts a new emphasis on communities and online interactions. The "Share" button is designed to make the uploading of game videos and images easy and seamless. The ability for players to stream games onto a Vita and remotely play them—or even remotely take over a game on the PS4 to help a friend in need—point to a philosophy of games and gamers going everywhere together. Sony's own emphasis on things like being able to play demos and games while they're still downloading, or even consigning game updates and installations to background downloads so there's no more waiting all show a company that has tracked the list of grievances voiced by gamers this generation, and tried to win them back. Perhaps most surprising of all is the dramatic, pro-consumer stance Sony is taking towards digital rights management and user privacy. Used games will continue to work just as they do now, while the PS4 will not require any kind of online check in or camera/microphone devices be plugged in at all times. It's a stunning counterattack to Microsoft's initial unapologetic, pro-corporate approach to the Xbox One and forced Microsoft to recant their policy just a week later.

Unfortunately it's not all good news, as backwards compatibility with the PS3 has been killed, and there's pie-in-the-sky talk of streaming those and other games for play via the Gaikai service Sony purchased last year. The new social features are going to integrate with social networking services like Facebook and urge players to use their real names, although Sony claims anonymity functions will still be available, a necessity when dealing with children and issues of female online harassment. And then there is the issue of the new PlayStation Eye. Like Kinect 2, it's a camera designed to work with the console, but to what degree and capacity is still a big unknown.

This eighth console generation is shaping up to be a big "reset." None of the players are safely moving into their former positions. All of them are trying something different. But all of them also face stiff competition in the form of tablets, smartphones and other devices that play games and do much, much more. Tastes have changed, economies have taken a tumble and the audience for games is much larger and more diverse than the simple hardcore gamer demographic that made up the business for so many years. In some ways, the eighth generation of consoles may be the last one carried out in the traditional manner, or as some darkly suggest, it may very well be the last console generation ever. It's too early to tell at this point, but everyone is watching to see what happens next for the medium. CG

THE FUTURE OF GAMING

E3'S GLIMPSE INTO NEW GAMING TRENDS

Words by Wayne Santos

Looking at the many games being unveiled at E3 this year, it was obvious that there were certain trends and technologies being used by a great many developers. Fashions affect even the gaming industry, and it looks like the next generation has a few hints about the new ways that people will be playing their games. Here's a quick survey of the gaming trends that are going to affect you as we move into a brave new world of new consoles and the games to play on them.

Open Worlds

This was all over the place. There was simply no getting away from it. The larger storage media, the increased processing power and the ballooning RAM have all made it possible for more than just Bethesda and Rockstar North to feasibly make open world games. *Everyone* seems to want to do it now. There are plenty of good reasons to do it too. Ever since Rockstar North first stunned the market with *Grand Theft Auto III* back in 2001, the entire industry and audience has been rocked by this newfound ability to traverse a huge areas and "go off the script," just giving into whatever evil or curious impulse occurred to see what happened next. It made for spontaneous, emergent narratives, as players found that the most exciting stories in the game were the ones they made up themselves, with random car chases, fights, or even just oddly authentic moments, such as the ability in *Grand Theft Auto IV* to give money to a street performer playing on the saxophone in a park. Before running him down and stealing that money back.

Now the catchphrase "open world" is moving from being a genre unto itself to a bullet point for other games. *The Witcher III* for example, by CD Projekt is going the route of an open world game, as is its rival, BioWare's *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, which is trying to open up the fictional world of Thedas for greater exploration options after the confinement to one city in *Dragon Age II*. Even driving games are going this route with Ubisoft's *The Crew* providing a large playground for players—and their online friends—to co-operate or compete in. In the realm of the zombie apocalypse, the Xbox One exclusive *Dead Rising 3* is also taking a page from *Grand Theft Auto*, finally moving out of singular locations like shopping malls and casinos to the fictional Los Perdidos for one massive, seamless city in which the player can kill literally tens of thousands of zombies. And of course, Ubisoft already learned their lesson with *Assassin's Creed*, so while the fourth game in the series is safely an open world experience, so is their latest game with a contemporary setting, *Watch_Dogs*, which puts the player in a fictional rendition of Chicago to explore—and hack—as they see fit.

Now that the technology has made the creation of open worlds a far less cumbersome experience, many developers are starting to appreciate what it offers to players. It broadens the lifespan of a game from a dozen hours to over 100 as players explore every nook and cranny, making up their own stories as they go along.

Second Screens

Another popular concept going forward—as popularized by Nintendo—is the use of some kind of second screen to enhance the gaming experience. Nintendo's Wii U makes this a standard feature, as the new GamePads come with a touchscreen built around the usual sticks and buttons that comprise a controller. Microsoft, on the other hand, uses SmartGlass; software that communicates with the console and a tablet (which doesn't have to be a Microsoft product) to act as a secondary display, or alternate interface for asymmetrical multiplayer possibilities. Sony has already experimented with such features using the Vita in PS3 games like the latest *Sly Cooper* sequel to act as a form of "treasure radar" and they are mandating that all PS4 games that don't require a camera can be streamed via wifi network to the PlayStation Vita.

In each respect, the hardware manufacturers are providing options for the gamers to bring in an additional peripheral to redirect or augment the gameplay experience. But what are these second screens going to be used for, exactly?

E3 already showed off a few examples of this second screen usage. Capcom's *Dead Rising 3*, for example, had one player using a tablet to call down air strikes for the zombie beleaguered hero, to clear a path to the next objective. Ubisoft showed off second screen use with *Watch_Dogs*, as another player hacked into—and disabled—a pursuing helicopter, giving the main character more room to manoeuvre during a chase sequence. Meanwhile, with Ubisoft's other open world title, *The Crew*, tablets and other mobile devices can be used as a secondary menu to customize cars before bringing them out on the road. EA's *Battlefield 4* puts would-be commanders in front of the tablet, providing a strategic, real-time map of the battle and various support abilities like supply and vehicle drops and, yes, heavy artillery strikes.

While all of these uses definitely have a novelty factor, there's still a question of whether they will remain new, evolving features in the long term, or simply prove to be flash-in-the-pan fashions with the novelty wearing off. The new features seem useful, but they will need to be carefully balanced so as to ensure that players who forgo them don't have suffer significantly. In the same way, a gamer that has a partner sit with them using the tablet should not be the recipient of an "I Win" button simply by having that second screen around.

Oculus Rift

This one has tried for years to break into gaming, but it was usually known by the more general term "Virtual Reality." This time, under the name of the specific unit Oculus Rift, there's far more attention, money, and actual technical consideration being paid to the concept and VR gaming was far more prominent at this E3 than it has been in years past. The big difference this time is the amount of support that the Oculus Rift VR unit has. From a successful Kickstarter campaign to a league of indie developers buying the prototype gear, to giants of the industry like John Carmack and even major corporations like Sony acquiring the prototype for their own research, it seems like this time much more attention is being paid to the possibilities of VR gaming.

There's good reason for that too. The Oculus Rift headset is lighter than previous VR gear attempts, but more importantly, it also boasts an expanded field of view, head tracking and the lowest latency yet seen in a VR unit. However, John Carmack himself has stated that at this stage, the latency/response is still not com-

functionality, but EA is betting heavily on players being wrong.

pletely satisfactory. But don't dismiss the strides that have already occurred. Anyone that remembers the early VR push of the 90s, with now mythic Silicon Valley visionaries like Jaron Lanier, will recall that the excitement and promise of VR stumbled badly in the face of its bulky, cumbersome reality. Oculus Rift, while by no means perfect, has addressed many of the issues that plagued those early pioneering attempts, and its impressively low production cost means that even indie developers—from whom some of the most original concepts are coming these days—can splurge on a system to experiment with it. Sound Self for example, is a unique virtual "short cut" to a deep state of meditation that puts users in a psychedelic tunnel that responds to their chants. The Recital is a trip into the dreams of a musician preparing for a concert, while *Eve VR*, from mad Icelandic developer CCP Games, showed off a fully fleshed, *Wing Commander* space combat sim that finally made players feel like they truly were in the cockpit of a hot rod starfighter.

All of these trends show the new directions that gaming is going in thanks to increased processing power and better technology. All of them could also be the victims of fashion; even a diehard fan of open world games can get tired from oversaturation, and second screen functionality has already proven a problematic sell for the Wii U. But the future can't happen without experiments to see what works and what doesn't. These are all promising developments for gaming, and it'll be interesting to see how they affect the future of games. CG

Building The DC Cinematic Universe

Words by Phil Brown

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Now that Zack Snyder's Man Of Steel has been released to the masses for popcorn chomping appreciation and internet scrutiny, the time has come for Warner Brothers to lay their cards on the table and start building their cinematic DC universe. It has to happen. Sure, WB can take credit for launching the first billion dollar superhero blockbuster thanks to Christopher Nolan's instantly iconic take on The Dark Knight, but while that franchise wrapped up in a conventional trilogy, Marvel Studios created an all-new and insanely profitable and superhero movie paradigm. Superhero movies are now the biggest business there is in La-la-land and since WB ran out of *Harry Potter* movies to bring them a guaranteed annual billion-dollar blockbuster, building a cinematic DC universe seems like the next logical step. Thanks to that special twenty first century joy that is massive media conglomerates, Time Warner owns DC, which means Warner Bros. has unlimited access to the entire DC catalogue for big-screenification. They don't need to make any multibillion dollar deal like Disney. Warners already has DC. They will make their own universe. The only question is if they will do it right.

Warner Bros. can take credit for launching the first billion dollar superhero blockbuster.

The biggest concern at the moment is that Warners has no team dedicated specifically to supervising their cinematic DC Universe for the fanboys sect. One of the major reasons why Marvel Studios' grand experiment didn't end up a grand folly is that the studio initially formed out of the comics company itself. Sure big man on campus Kevin Feige had already been involved with every Marvel superhero movie from *X-Men* and *Spider-Man 2* to *Electra* (shudder), but he was a representative from the comic book world working within the studio system. When he convinced Marvel to funnel their movie profits into an independent entity to make *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk*, it was an unprecedented move that could have taken the entire Marvel Comics business down with it. However, Feige and co. were smart enough to put their new franchises into the hands of the comics geeks because, well, that's who they are. The result was the biggest and most successful series of superhero adaptations of them all. Working with a B-roll team of characters since the big boys like *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, and *The Fantastic Four* were sold off to other companies long ago, Marvel created the first fully interactive big screen superhero universe and the Comic-Con crowd couldn't hand over their cash fast enough.

The morning that The Avengers' record busting $200 million opening weekend gross was announced, you can guarantee there was a meeting held amongst Warner Brothers executives. After all, DC has a stable of heroes who form the Justice League and back in the comic book days, they beat Marvel to the punch in create a superhero super-

All of DC's marquee characters were created in a pre-irony era: Superman is an unapologetic boy scout, Wonder Woman is an Amazonian god.

star team up. WB had even toyed with making a Justice League movie many times before, at one point giving *Mad Max/Babe* auteur George Miller the keys to the JLA and allowing him to take the project to the point of fitting actors into their iconic costumes before pulling the plug. They could have had the first all-star superhero team up and the billions of fanboy dollars therein. But they didn't and watched Marvel beat them to the box office busting punch. Now that a formula has been established for a superhero team up movie that involves a few obscenely popular blockbuster set-ups before the big payoff, it pretty well goes without saying that DC will Xerox the Marvel playbook. The trouble is making that experiment work isn't as simple as releasing *Superman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, Flash,* and *Martian Manhunter* movies and then combining them all in Justice League and counting the profits. No, it's far trickier than that.

For one thing, DC has no grand geek surveyor of their superhero department. That's crucial and even Fox brought in fan favourite Mark Millar to look over their upcoming slate of Marvel flicks. The closest thing they have is Christopher Nolan (who has made it quite clear that he cares about no hero as much as Batman) or David Goyer, who boats a spotty track record at best (*Blade Trinity*, anyone?). Sure, they've got your usual studio executive infrastructure, but that team made the Ryan Reynolds' *Green Lantern* debacle as well as *The Dark Knight Trilogy*, so they can't exactly be trusted. Warners needs someone who loves and understands all of these characters. Nolan and Goyer may have been a good Batman team, but that's only because their grounded n' gritty take was perfect for a certain type of Batman movie. *The Man Of Steel's* awkward stabs at an existential emo Superman prove their tone isn't ideal for all characters and that's a problem. There's a big, glorious, goofy Flash movie to be made as well as a campy *Wonder Woman* movie, but the DC comics brand is all about "realistic" darkness (including the new *Green Arrow* TV show) that contrasts is Marvel's poppy sugar high and that darkness could swallow up the appeal of those characters in a whiny, teary, eye-shadow-heavy minute.

Then there's one other major problem. The central DC characters who would make up the Justice League are a very different bunch than the Marvel heroes. Starting with Spider-Man, Marvel ushered in the age of the neurotic superhero. All their characters have personal lives that clash awkwardly with their costumed crime-fighting. In the Marvel movies, the filmmakers ingeniously turned that into a comedic streak that

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runs through all their franchises. Their characters are either awkwardly heroic like Iron Man or their perfect hero stature is ironically clashed against a contemporary setting (the God among sarcastic teens comedy of Thor or the unstuck in time "golly gee" innocence of Captain America). That's played a crucial and rarely discussed role in making these geeky icons work for the masses and it's not a card that DC can play. All of DC's marquee characters were created in a pre-irony era: Superman is an unapologetic boy scout, Wonder Woman is an Amazonian god, Green Lantern is a cosmic police officer with a brain-bendingly complex backstory, and the best Flash tales are rooted in oddball metaphysics and 60s-era psychedelics. You can't poke fun at these guys without losing something special at their core and their serious n' deep mythology is what's kept the characters from appealing to all but the most obsessed comic book nerd after their T-shirt and action figure phase of childhood. Now, that's not to say sincere movies about these characters wouldn't be fun, they just wouldn't play as well to audiences who don't have years of comic book continuity squirreled away in their brains. Batman is different because he has no superpowers and was radically reinvented in 80s comics as a harsh action hero in the style of the films of the time. He can play differently. The other characters are for the geeks and certainly shouldn't be treated with brooding gravitas.

Now, there is one silver lining for Warner Bros. executives. If they are truly committed to being the dark shadow to Marvel's ray of sunshine in the great superhero blockbuster war, there is a precedent in comic book history that they could follow for success. This is of course the exact same battle that DC and Marvel fought in the 1980s when comics were at the peak of their variant cover popularity. Marvel defined themselves as a big colourful company of soap operas and dventures lead by artists like Jim Lee and Todd MacFarlane. DC on the other hand was a writer-driven company known for dark books (eventually cranked out through their Vertigo line) pitched at the growing adult comic book market. There is a wealth of incredible adult driven comic books that DC published during this time that would fit the dark DC cinematic tone perfectly. We're talking about classics like Alan Moore's epic *Swamp Thing* series, Neil Gaiman's poetic *Sandman*, Grant Morrison's surreal gang of misfits *The Doom Patrol*, *Hellblazer*, *Animal Man*, *Transmetropolitan*, and on and on. That is a deep well of masterful comic book creations DC should mine for their Dark Knight-flavoured

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universe. Unfortunately, those characters are too dark to shift stuffed dolls, lunch boxes, and underoos, not to mention the fact that there's no Justice League light at the end of that tunnel.

The dark DC/Vertigo cinematic universe would undeniably be a treat for fans and provide a perfect counterpoint to the Marvel movie shenanigans, the trouble is that it's just not as popular for the contemporary movie market. Let's not forget Warner Brothers has already made movies out of Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and *V For Vendetta* and while both made a significant mark on pop culture in their own way, the profits were not even remotely close to *Dark Knight* levels. To do those franchises right would require R-ratings that would cripple the box office potential. So, from a business standpoint it's not as strong a decision as it is from a creative standpoint and all blockbusters are derived from a business standpoint. However, things aren't as dire as they seem.

While the *Man Of Steel's* massive success may have already made this an impossibility, as far as I see it there is a possible solution. The Justice League gang will make bazillions, so do those and lighten them up. Bruce Timm and his DC Animation buddies have done incredible work for decades with these characters that strikes just the right balance between fantasy, reverence, and humour. Since blockbusters are mostly animated these days anyway, why not reward those guys for keeping the characters alive in the public conscious by letting them take over the live action franchises. Even Batman will be reinvented anyway since everyone involved with the Nolan-verse is done and Timm created a Batman dark enough for Two Face and goofy enough for Clayface long ago. Let the JLA series be a goofy, but non-ironic spin on the Marvel model for kids and then have another division cranking out dark Vertigo adaptations for the 20-30 something *Dark Knight* audiences.

Warners already made obscene sums of money with their R-rated *Matrix* franchise and there's no reason they couldn't do it again with Vertigo titles if someone talented and reverential enough took over that division (like say Guillermo Del Toro who already has a "Dark Justice League" project on the development treadmill that would be a hell of a brand definer). Do that and Warner Bros. could have two comic book divisions cranking out two universes for two different audiences and maybe even beat Marvel at their own game. It might just be wishful thinking, but we're also living in the age of the superhero blockbuster when these types of thoughts are both tantalizing fantasies and potential billion-dollar realities. The world doesn't need a dark Wonder Woman movie. But, a fun Wonder Woman movie and a horror blockbuster *Swamp Thing*... now we're talking. C&G

Dear Reader,
Send us your letters at
letters@cgmagazine.ca
Sincerely,
The CG Team

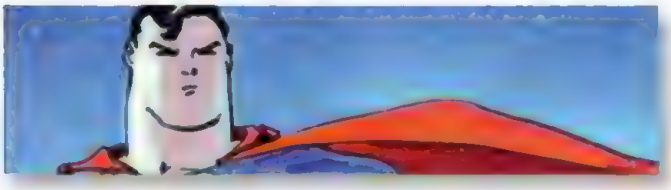
Top Five Superman Comics

Here's the best in Superman comics to go with Man of Steel

Words by Bobby Shortle

5 April 18, 1938 is not a date many people know, but it was the day that changed everything. It was on this unassuming spring day that *Action Comics #1* hit the stands and ushered in the era of superhero comics. If it were not for that book and its creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, we would not have Batman, the X-Men or even the Avengers.

Now 75 years later, as the world's first costumed superhero flies back onto the big screen, we look a just a few of the stories that made the character who he is. Some of these stories are full of heart, others are packed to the gills with action, but all of them get the essence of the *Man of Steel*. So, after you've seen Zack Snyder's new film, stop by your local comic book shop and keep the adventures of Superman going all through the summer.



Superman For All Seasons

"He flies, he can see through walls. He can lift up cars or bounce bullets off his chest or do just about anything he wants to. And that's the part that gets me. He can do anything he wants to and he decides to do what? Be a hero?"

The best heroes are the ones who stop your heart. Not just with antics, but with the emotional truths they provide. In For All Seasons, writer Jeph Loeb constructs the defining picture of the Last Son of Krypton's formative years. There is perhaps no one in comics who can bring the true heart of a character to the forefront like Mr. Loeb, and his Superman tale is no exception.

The story is broken up into four chapters that each correspond with a season of the year. This is a wistful and sentimental look at a spring, summer, fall and winter as told through the eyes of Lois Lane, Lex Luthor, Jonathan Kent and Lana Lang. *For All Seasons*, from the grand prose to the water-coloured warmth of Tim Sale's art, is a siren song of truth, justice and everything that the Man of Steel has always stood for.

Superman: Red Son

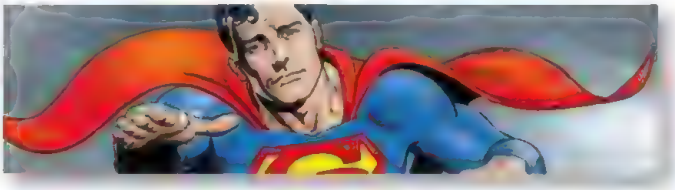
"Why don't you just put the whole world in a bottle, Superman?"

Mark Millar's Elseworlds tale of a Superman who lands in Soviet Russia instead of the American breadbasket is both one of the most entertaining comic books I've ever read and a fascinating insight into the concept of nature vs. nurture.

Like all of Millar's work, *Red Son* is a tale of bombast and extremities. For every departure he makes, however, the writer still manages to stay true to everything that makes the Man of Tomorrow who he is.

More than anything though, *Red Son* deals with the question of power and the responsibility that comes with it. If you had the means in which to mold the world, would you shrink it down and control it using

fear? Or would you build it up and let it soar higher than you ever could?



Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?
"It's only a bird, only a plane. Superman died ten years ago. This is an imaginary story... aren't they all?"

When DC Comics chose to reboot their entire universe with Crisis on Infinite Earths, they could have simply let the last few issues of their current titles go out with a whimper. Instead, they tapped Alan Moore and legendary Superman artist Curt Swan to close out the Pre-Crisis era in grand fashion. Moore crafted a two-part imaginary tale of the Man of Steel's "last story," and the result is a work of utter genius.

Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow is a story of strength, in will and in musculature, as well as one of morality. It examines the burden of being the protector of a world and the simple responsibility of being a citizen in it. In the book's most gripping moment, Clark sits in the Fortress of Solitude and cries for the ones he couldn't save. In this moment he's not an indestructible alien, but a man coming to grips with the limits of his power.

Superman: Birthright
"You watch what happens the next time someone tries to co-op that symbol. People know now. It stands for courage. It stands for hope. It stands for Superman."

With *Birthright* writer Mark Waid and artist Leinil Yu bring us a modern retelling of the Superman origin that somehow manages to keep the moral center of the time in which the hero first appeared. I

The book also has the best showcase I've read of just how tectonic a force Lois Lane is in Clark's life. She is strong, smart, bull-headed and sometimes overbearing but she is also the love that drives the man behind the S to achieve his full potential.

The same can be said about his greatest nemesis. In *Birthright*, Luthor is a layered villain who is never reduced to just a scheme or nefarious plot. Instead he is a lost soul looking for his place in the world.

The true measure of *Birthright* though isn't its fantastic action or its clever plotting, but in its gut-punching final page. It's the kind of payoff only possible in long form storytelling, and is a reminder that the story of Superman is just as much about the love of parents as it is the triumphs of the child.

All-Star Superman
"You have given them an ideal to aspire to, embodied their highest aspirations. They will race, and stumble and fall and curse and finally, they will join you in the sun Kal-el."

If you want the entire history, mythos and ethos of the Last Son of Krypton squished into one twelve part masterwork then look no further than Grant Morrison's *All-Star Superman*. Like Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow, *All-Star* is an "imaginary" tale that sees a Superman poisoned by the very sun that gives him his power. Now, with his end in sight, Kal-El must prepare the world for the day when it no longer has a Superman.

It's interesting, for a writer so often criticized for his outlandish and attention-getting storytelling, Morrison sure loves the past. His one-and-done, oddball issues of All-Star Superman take the idea of decompressed storytelling and throw it out the window. Instead, Morrison endeavors to tell us the kind of dense, zany, and morally bright tales of days past. These stories range from the insightful (Clark Kent interviewing Lex Luthor from prison) to the ridiculous (a trip that Kal-El takes to the home of Bizzaro) and even to the emotionally devastating (I dare you to not cry when Clark manipulates time and space so he can be with Jonathan Kent as he passes away).

All of these stories endeavour to do one thing: show us just what Superman is really all about. That we can always be kinder, climb higher, fly faster, reach farther and that we can never do enough to make the world a better place. *All-Star* will have you thinking about the Man of Steel long after you close its final page and it's that lasting impression that makes it the number one Superman story to read along with the Man of Steel this summer. CG

BLACKBERRY AND THE FUTURE OF GAMING

How Blackberry is planning ahead

Words by Zoya Street

Forget the PS4 or the Xbox One: the richest territory in next-gen gaming is mobile, and Blackberry wants to claim the throne.

Blackberry's vision is for a future where consoles will no longer be relevant; they told me that the phone will be the primary gaming device, on big screens and small. For that to work, they need to attract talented game developers. I spoke with Marty Mallick, the head of app ecology, to understand Blackberry's strategy for dominating the mobile games market.

"It's not that you just build an application and have your own isolated experience," Mallick explained. "We give [developers] the ability to integrate it into the overall infrastructure that we provide on Blackberry 10. You have a whole new way of discovering content, and more importantly, engaging with that content on a regular basis."

As we dug deeper into how Blackberry 10 might make great games easier to discover, and make gameplay experiences more engaging, his story quickly unravelled. Blackberry is trying to improve its app ecosystem through the creation of other apps, in a complicated Russian doll manoeuvre that even Mallick himself hardly engages with; he had only a dozen friends on Blackberry's Games app.

He had little knowledge of the indie games that the platform has attracted to date, despite the fact that improving the platform's app ecosystem is his job. His lack of interest in indie is symptomatic of Blackberry's focus on big-name publishers, even though the examples of iOS and Android suggest that the mobile games market is not driven by the established AAA studios.

Mallick explained that he was too busy to play games, but then described Blackberry's core market as primarily businesspeople who are looking for more efficiency in both their work and their leisure. If the app ecosystem he is responsible for is failing to interest even him, how can it hope to engage Blackberry's so-called 'psychographic' of busy people?

Comics & Gaming Magazine: On other platforms, the success of mobile gaming has been driven by breakaway hits from independent developers. How successful have your efforts been at encouraging indie devs to adopt Blackberry 10?

Marty Mallick: We've seen a steady march towards increased adoption by game developers on Blackberry. If you look at Blackberry OS, [our old] java-based operating system, we had a healthy number of games from top manufacturers and developers. But the platform itself was never a gaming platform per se. It didn't have native capabilities.

"We've seen a steady march towards increased adoption by game developers on Blackberry."

- Marty Mallick

When we went over to Playbook, it was our first step towards Blackberry 10: providing a truly native development environment so you can really start building those amazing high-performance games. We started seeing like Electronic Arts bring over things like Dead Space. Sega brings over the Sonic franchise. Angry Birds of course came onboard.

As we go to Blackberry 10, we've seen adoption accelerate. We saw Marmalade for example come out very early on with their engine supporting the platform. We had Unity announcing that they are coming out with full support for Blackberry 10 on their platform. We have the Unreal engine.

CGM: What indie games are exciting you at the moment?

MM: I'm probably not the best person unfortunately to ask about that. Even though I actually am really big into gaming, the last number of weeks for me have been nothing but getting ready for the US launch. By the nature of how the industry works, we end up putting a lot more focus from a launch perspective on the games that people expect to have. A lot of my time has been on [making sure] we have the right titles from Electronic Arts or Gameloft or whoever else. There is less time for me to insert myself personally and just discover some of these really great new titles that are coming. Just by nature my team actually focuses on working and engaging directives in the bigger name brand partners. It's the apps that you know you love.

CGM: Tell me more about the monetization environment. That's a major challenge for Android.

MM: There's two components to that. One is being very aggressive on anti-piracy; just allowing people to sell titles and not have to worry about them being stolen. We put a lot focus on that, making sure right at the very platform level that we don't enable jail-breaking to get free access to content. If somebody does notice that somebody is copying their IP or using their trademarks incorrectly, we have a very straightforward process to help the IP holders.

In terms of driving monetization, one of the most important things is carrier billing capabilities. We have carrier billing active now with well over 50 carriers globally. That [allows] users of Blackberry to quickly make purchases, whether they are upfront to purchase the game or in the app. It's a seamless way to pay, without worrying about entering your credit card data, or not having a credit card.

CGM: Blackberry has a long tradition serving the business community, but then it looked like there was a huge take-up among teenagers for BBM. Where are things going now? Who's your major audience?

MM: It continues to be very diverse. Of course, the business user is still a core audience for us: a very important audience, and one that continues to use Blackberry very frequently. An interesting thing about the business audience is they love games. They are consumers at the end of the day as well.

If we look beyond that, we still have a huge base of users that are teenagers, and users that are not your typical business user, but [owners of] small businesses.

The way we look at it within Blackberry is it's not as much a demographic as it is more of a psychographic. It's more of a personality type: somebody who wants to have a device that enables them to be productive, to be efficient, to get things done in a meaningful way. That's not just in the work side of their life, it's also in the personal side of their life: being able to have the entertainment that they are looking for.

The way we look at it within Blackberry is it's not as much a demographic as it is more of a psychographic.

CGM: How are you making gaming more efficient?

MM: The Games app is a relatively straightforward experience that allows you to see the games that you are playing and get updates on what achievements you've hit. There are leaderboard capabilities in the app. There's recommendations in the app, which I find quite helpful.

It's essentially a social gaming leader board. You have all of your friends set up, and games can integrate directly with this. From an end-user perspective it's the gamification aspect; seeing what your friends are doing and challenging your friends to different experiences.

CGM: So it's your BBM contacts?

MM: Yes, so if I look at requests that I have active right now, I can actually see which games they are playing, which I find very interesting from a discovery perspective. If they are playing that, somebody they interact with may go, "Ho, what is that?" If I hit 'add' I can add them in, go and get that game and start having that interactive play with them.

BBM is often a way that people can discover who they'd like to add to this. If I'm playing I go, "Hey, here's my BBM friends." I can invite them and say, "Hey, you should join Blackberry Games, here's the games I'm playing what are you playing?" Challenge them to something, view leader boards, all of those types of things. Just making that overall experience and your device much more social.

CGM: What's the difference between someone being in your BBM contacts and adding them in the Blackberry Games app?

MM: If I look in BBM, I just have to find someone's profile that will have some gaming stuff in it. Let me just do that really quickly and I'll give an example. If I go to Anders [Jeppsson, head of Gaming] here, I can go look at his profile and in his profile it will show me some of the different games that he has. It says he has Shark Dash and he has Borders Plus and a few other things that he's currently promoting to his social community. When you install you decide, "Do I want to advertise that I'm using this, playing this, do I want to I want to updates of this particular game through BBM?" Whereas Blackberry Games is much more about the ongoing interaction of the game itself. I don't engage them directly here in Blackberry Messenger. In Blackberry Games it's much more of the interactive experience with your friends and social community.

CGM: How many friends do you have on Blackberry Games?

MM: I don't have that many. I haven't ... I don't know, I think it's like a dozen or something like that right now, which ...it just goes back to my specific time and how much time I've had to actually play with this. C&G

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Coming Home

Words by Wayne Santos / Illustration by Sandy Vazan

Fear means a lot of things to a lot of different people, but one of the universal truths about fear is that something is at risk. When we talk about horror, that risk—and its subsequent fear—usually comes in the form of an endangered life, the threat of being killed. But there are other things that can be put at risk, like a career and a future. That's what Benjamin Rivers did when he singlehandedly created Home, but the risk, and fear that came with it, paid off.

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Horror is a more of a niche genre in gaming these days, and psychological horror even more so. The big reason for the decline in popularity is that at its heart, horror preys on feelings of powerlessness and fear. For there to be horror, there must be a victim, and most people that play games don't want to feel victimized, it runs counter to the promises of fun filled escapism that most games offer. But despite that, there's still an allure to horror even in gaming where it doesn't have the same pull as film or novels. But horror isn't an easy thing to do, and it becomes an even greater challenge when the effort is a solo one.

That's the challenge Benjamin Rivers set for himself with the indie effort known as *Home*. The PC psychological horror game carried a retro, 2D pixel art look as it followed the efforts of a man who woke up in a strange house somewhere in his home town, trying to get home and stumbling on grisly evidence that something horrible had occurred while he was unconscious. It was a long road to release, but in the aftermath—and success—of *Home's* debut, Rivers is now willing to talk about it.

Home

A HORROR GAME HISTORY

~2002

Ben, at the time unknowingly, pens the story that would become *Home*... but forgets about it for about ten years. Life continues on as normal.

2010

Under inspiration from his wife to make a murder-mystery game, Ben uses his story and starts work on it. Does this make *Home* the first 'found-foot-age' game?

Oct. 2010

Home production comes together slowly as Ben maintains other work. But, with a spike of interest from IGF with the Home trailer, Ben goes full-time.

2011

With a self-funded budget of around $30,000, Ben leaves the world of freelance design to dedicate more of his time to the production of *Home*.

April 2012

Pre-orders for the boxed version of *Home* are offered, and the gaming media gives *Home* a huge signal boost. Pacing design and pack-ins are finalized.

June 2012

Final story beats are realized in the days prior to launch. Distribution is locked down, and the game is released on April 5, 2012, with a 65* Rotten Tomatoes Critic.

June 2013

Home is patched as needed in post-release support. *Home* has since been released on Steam, and is expecting an iOS release in the summer of 2013.

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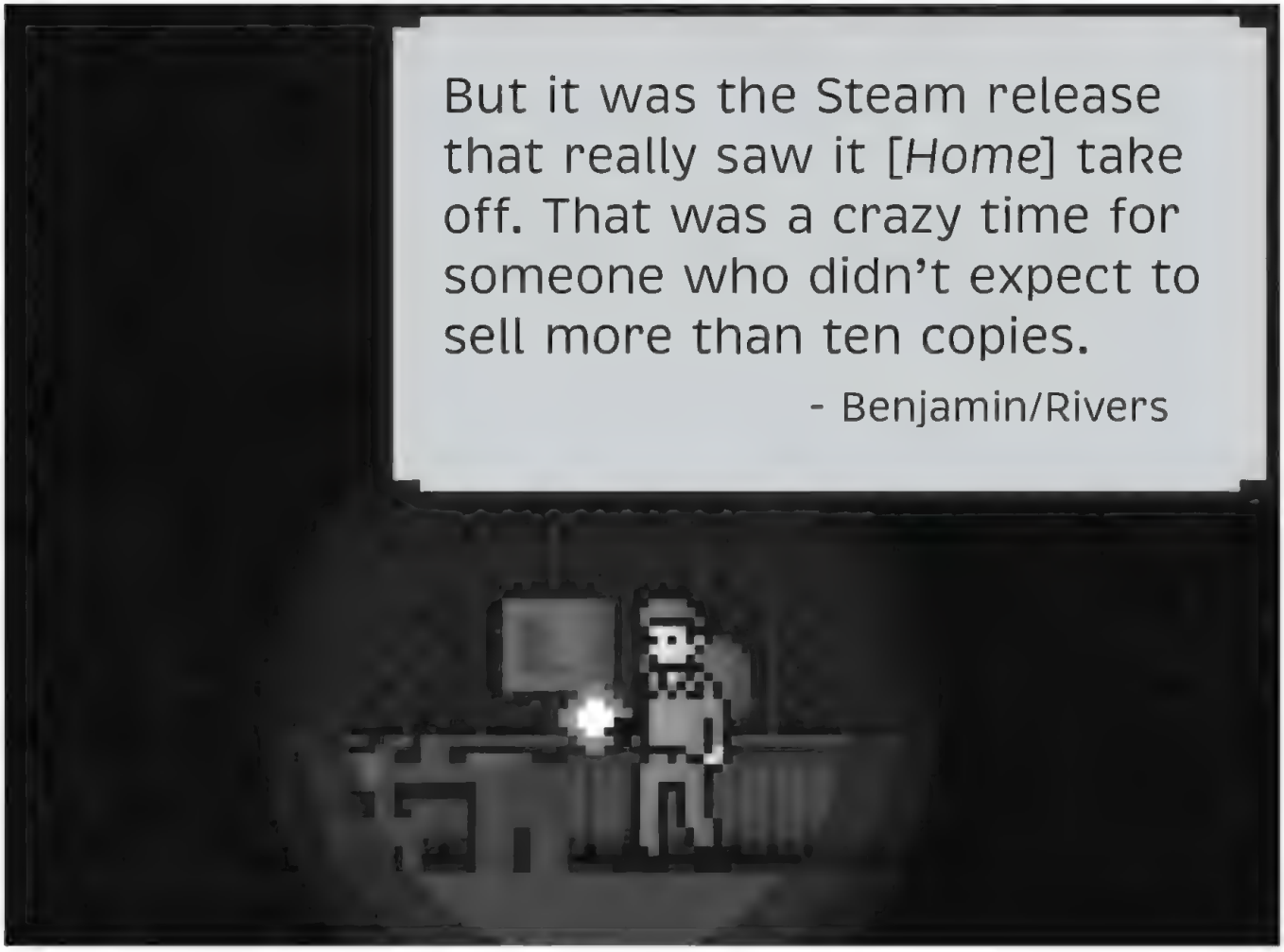

But it was the Steam release that really saw it [*Home*] take off. That was a crazy time for someone who didn't expect to sell more than ten copies.
- Benjamin/Rivers

The Cornerstone

Rivers himself is part of that increasingly rare breed, the renaissance man. He is an illustrator, he is a writer, he is a programmer, he is a teacher, he is a comic book creator and of course, he also makes videogames. Based out of Toronto and affiliated with the indie game developers alliance of the city known as The Hand Eye Society, Rivers worked diligently creating adventure games based on his own comic work, *Snow*, as well as bizarre experiments like *Drunken Rampage* which was designed to work with the classic Atari 2600 joystick.

Home however, was a different beast. "*Home* is by far the biggest project of any kind I've ever undertaken," Rivers admits. "With the PC release, and now the mobile version, I've spent nearly three years of my life on this one title. My original idea for it was to come up with a fun weekend project—boy, that sure got out of hand fast!"

Unlike his other projects, this game didn't originally start out as a game concept, but came from a different place. "Some time ago I apparently wrote what was to be the first chapter in a story about a man in a locked room," Rivers says. "I found it on my computer a couple of years ago and thought it was a nice kick-off for something. At the time, my wife was encouraging me to try my hand at a murder mystery, and as a big fan of horror games, I started to put the pieces together. The rest of the game came together as a series of calls and responses to questions or ideas I had."

Of course, having an idea and executing are two different things. Benjamin Rivers is not a full time game developer, so despite games being a dominant passion in his life, it's not something he gets to do amongst other activities, such as illustrating for clients or teaching at the Ontario College of Art & Design. Time was always going to be a problem. "I was juggling client projects, family duties and so on at the time," Rivers says. "So the first eight months of development consisted of a weekend here, an evening there. All told, the original PC release was about six months of work spread out over a year-and-a-half."

Since then, he's had to go back and revisit the coding aspects of the game. For the initial release, Rivers only had the time and resources do a PC version. But it had always been a long term goal to move *Home* onto the now ubiquitous iOS devices and he finally got a chance recently to do it. It just meant a lot more work. "I've had to go back in and recode most of the game from scratch, due to a few particular issues," he says. "That's been another straight seven months or so."

In total, Rivers has spent over two years working alone on his game. And once it was finished, what was the result?

The Reaction

It all began, as most of these things do today, with a trailer, released in autumn of 2011 for the Independent Games Festival. Rivers himself confesses, "I was really surprised to see large websites pick it up and run with it. That got everyone's attention, and several months before launch, the game's in-universe Twitter feed [@homehorror] and new press materials kept the interest level surprisingly high for such a small game."

The game itself released on June 12, 2012, available on River's own website and eventually the Steam digital delivery platform a couple of months later. It was not, Rivers admitted, an easy, ride. "Releasing the game via my own website was a particularly new and bizarre kind of stress; I was bug-fixing 20 minutes before the game's launch."

But despite the last minute tweaks there was an audience waiting for the game. "I was impressed that it was getting downloads and attention when it launched at midnight on June first," he says. "But it was the Steam release that really saw it take off. That was a crazy time for someone who didn't expect to sell more than ten copies."

Once the game was out, Rivers had the unenviable task of being a one man marketing and public relations firm. He had to promote his own game himself. It took a lot of diligence, including talking to the press, maintaining a Twitter presence and other efforts. In his own words, it was "All out-of-pocket, all just on a try-it-and-see basis." And from that experience he gleaned some valuable wisdom for other indie developers. "You can't dump your game in a vacuum and hope for success; you have to put a lot of effort into spreading the word."

One of his more interesting efforts was going completely "old school" and releasing a physical box and 3 ½" diskette with other accessories, an homage to the old Infocom text adventures that riddled players of the 80s with props relevant to the game to set the tone and mood. "This was one of the biggest marketing successes for *Home*, and it was a surprise for me," he says. "People loved the physical boxes, and I personally still feel it's the best representation of the game, particularly because of one of the included items, the envelope. A lot of that content has had to make its way into the game in other forms, but that initial experience, I think, was well worth the effort. I love hearing about players who had to dig up a floppy drive in order to tease out one of the puzzles."

> **"Make cool stuff; listen to people; but don't be afraid to take a chance, even though it seems insane."**
>
> *Benjamin Rivers on lessons learned from Home*

Since then, the game has been quietly garnering its own positive buzz. "Other than a few wayward reviews that I don't necessarily think were entirely fair to the game, critical reception has been very strong," Rivers says. "I appreciate and read each and every critique—and make no mistake, if there's a perceived issue with the game, I've probably lost at least a week of sleep regarding it long ago. As with any game, you get folks on all sides, but the people who like it seem very loyal and very committed to spreading word about it, which of course I appreciate immensely."

The Aftermath

Home has now been out for about a year, and in that time, it's still man-

aged to occupy a lot of Rivers' time. "Releasing *Home*," Rivers says, "Was a wonderful way to learn what now seems obvious; you will never spend more time on a game than after it's supposedly 'done.' Bug fixes, community support, promotion, new content—the game lives on and on. Lots of folks don't realize it, but comments and suggestions about content or possible plot points have often made their way into game updates. I've been adding little bits of content here and there since it launched last year."

Despite all that, the game still lingers in his mind, even though he admits he's done just about everything he can. "I don't think the game will ever be done in my mind. It's always there, presenting a new bug for me to fix or a new missed opportunity that grates at my brain. I couldn't have done anything differently during development, because everything that makes the game what it is today was entirely—and I mean 100 per cent here—out of my grasp just a couple of years ago. I built that bridge as I was marching across it."

However that doesn't mean he isn't thinking about the future. "I've hinted at possible next projects throughout this year, and once *Home* has safely landed for Mac and mobile, I am looking forward to start churning through some concepts and prototypes to see what works. I can't wait to get back to that phase where lots of fun stuff happens very quickly; I'm not good at sitting still, so I don't imagine it'll be too long before I'm right back into the thick of it."

At the end of it all, Rivers walks away with a successful indie game that has been well received by critics and has gotten him noticed by gamers. It's not a bad way to make a debut with a much more ambitious solo effort, and lessons have been learned. What lessons? "Easy," Rivers says. "Make cool stuff; listen to people; but don't be afraid to take a chance, even though it seems insane." CG

SHELTERED

An Interview with Ed Brisson, Johnnie Christmas, and Shari Chankhamma

Words by Nicole Rodrigues

It's the end of the world as we know it, but the residents of Safe Haven are prepared. That's the basic premise behind Image Comics' *Sheltered* series debuting on July 10, but as always, the devil is (literally) in the details of these resident's best laid plans. Not for the faint of heart, it's a brutal story that takes a look at the fascinating, if a bit unsettling world of apocalypse preparers. They exist and they're ready for just about anything, with storerooms of supplies and bunkers prepared for the worst. Penned by Ed Brisson, letterist-turned-writer on the recent time travel tinged *Comeback* series, he's teamed up with past *Murder Book* collaborator Johnnie Christmas (artist on *Continuum: The War Files*) and Shari Chankhamma (colourist on *Kill Shakespeare: Tide of Blood*) on *Sheltered*. We caught up with all three of them to find out how the series came about, what's in store for the ironically named town of Safe Haven, and just how bad it will get for the people who live there.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: Can you give us a brief synopsis of Sheltered in your own words?

Johnnie Christmas: It's about a survivalist society that goes through an upheaval when the young people in it stage a rebellion. Grappling for power at the end of the world.

Ed Brisson: What John said! Basically, the youth think the world is going to end – have evidence that this is the case—and have to make some *very* drastic and devastating decisions.

CGM: What was the inspiration behind Sheltered, and what was the process from inception to publication?

JC: Ed's been interested in [apocalypse] preppers for a while now and I've always been fascinated with apocalyptic imagery. I guess people have always been interested in that stuff, all religions and most cultures have creation myths but most also have end-of-the-world prophecies. When the wheels of destruction are grinding in your direction, what would you do to survive? Where are your loyalties? What sacrifices are you willing to make? We think those are ingredients for a really compelling story.

EB: Initially I was researching to do a post-apocalyptic story, but then became obsessed with preppers and that style of life. In particular, I really became fascinated with preppers who were parents and were preparing their kids for the end-of-days. What does that do to a kid's psyche? How does that affect their worldview? The end of the world is a lot to put on a kid! From there, I just started expanding out how things might look when the end came – or the *threat* of the end, anyway. How would these teens face it?

CGM: How did you three end up collaborating on this book? Can you describe your involvement during each step? e.g. Do you discuss pages/story together, or work independently on issues?

JC: Ed and I have wanted to work on a longer piece for some time now. We had a blast working on a couple of *Murder Book* stories, so we knew we worked well together. Shari was working with Ed on various projects, when we started looking around for a colourist, he asked her to do a sample page. She was the missing piece; she's a perfect fit for *Sheltered*!

Ed will send me a script and I'll give my feedback, then I'll do the art and Ed will give his feedback. So we definitely discuss what goes on but there is a lot of room for individual freedom in the process.

Shari Chankhamma: Before *Sheltered*, I was flatting *Comeback* for Ed, so you could say I got a bit of a promotion. As for my involvement, colourist is almost last in the production line so by the time pages were in my hands, the script for that issue was more or less final. We use Dropbox to collaborate. I'd send Ed and Johnnie .jpg previews of the finished pages first, and we'd go over stuff that needed fixing. Once everyone's happy with the colours, I upload the high res files and then wait for next issue.

EB: What they said! Johnnie and I used to have studios down the hall from one another and would talk about comics when we saw each other. We'd pop into each other's studio to see what the other was working on and eventually got to talking about doing something together. We did a couple *Murder Book* stories, and wanted to do something longer. Something bigger. So, when *Comeback* came out, Johnnie and I sat down and started pitching.

When Shari was flatting things for *Comeback*, I didn't realize that she was actually a colourist (on the other hand, I think she thought I was a colourist). Johnnie and I were on the hunt for a colourist and I dropped Shari an email asking if she knew any colourists who were available – figuring that, as a flatter, she probably worked for a few. She then sent me a bunch of her samples and we were blown away. She did a test page and there was no question from that point. Shari was in.

As to the process, Johnnie and I generally meet once a week or so and talk things over. I throw ideas past him when thinking on the script and he throws things back. I then run off and write the script and send it back to him for feedback. From there, John is off to the races!

CGM: Shari/Johnnie, what were your reactions when you first read the script? Do you know how it all ends, if you're not already working on the final issue?

JC: I thought the script was brilliant; it's the best stuff Ed's ever written. We hammered out what the ending would be before we started working on the first page. Of course I can't say more on that matter, but I predict Sheltered is going to be a much-talked-about series for some time to come.

SC: I love the concept. My first thought was 'Why didn't I think of this first?' which was my usual reaction when I read something really good. I don't know the end yet, but as a colourist, I do have some privilege to see the ending before the book is released.

CGM: Were there any specific story elements that inspired the artistic approach/colour scheme?

JC: The atmosphere of the piece most inspired my artistic approach. It's a dark story, but it's also a story about children and coming of age and survival. So I tried to modulate between shade and light. Though things get heavy, I want the resilience of the characters to shine through.

SC: Snow, snow everywhere. My main concern is to make sure it's not all white and plain. I like to keep the overall tone soft and understated, so when the time is right, I can make certain elements pop.

CGM: What has been your favourite moment so far, if you can mention it without spoiling too much for readers?

EB: There's a panel on the second to last page of issue #1 that still sends chills up my spine. I won't say what, for fear of spoiling.

Also, in the second issue, there's a great scene where Lucas is talking to some of the other kids and explaining something completely awful in the most straight-forward and businesslike manner. It's just... I don't know. So good. The research that went into his two or three lines of dialogue there actually gave me nightmares.

JC: There is a moment in issue two, where one of our main character's world has been totally turned on its head. It's a great series of pages where she transforms from an apathetic teenager to someone who has needs make clear decisions, and fast, if she hopes to have any chance at surviving.

CGM: Is it your intention to test reader's comfort zones or is that just a by-product of telling such a dark story? What do you think fans reactions will be?

JC: I know fans will love it! It's the kind of story that I would *love* to read as a fan. It's bracing and direct and moves in an emotionally honest way.

EB: Anything awful that happens will make sense to the story. Even the events of the first issue... they should make sense as the series goes on. There's nothing in here just for shock value, but there is plenty of dark stuff to come.

CGM: The first issue ends on a very shocking note, should readers expect things to get worse for the characters?

JC: Our characters are definitely going to go on an emotional and action-packed roller coaster ride. Some of them might not survive it.

EB: Yeah, issue #1 is just the beginning of a very intense downward spiral for these kids.

CGM: Anything else you'd like to tell readers?

JC: We've got handy, "how to survive the end of the world" advice at the back of each issue. Entertaining (and potentially useful) stuff.

EB: Yeah, those are fun. Find out all the different ways that the world can end! (Welcome to my hell). CG

Behind Marvel's Massive Loot Fest

Marvel Hero's David Brevik talks RPGs

Words by Ustad Khaira

dMags.net

MMO's are constantly changing scene. Still ruled by those inhabiting the land of Azeroth, new games arise to offer players different experiences, iterating and innovating on the genre's foundations. Where once a monthly subscription was required to get in to one of these worlds, more titles have begun winning players over with a free-to-play model. The latest to do this is *Marvel Heroes*, a superhero MMO from one of the minds behind the *Diablo* series, David Brevik, and Gazillion Entertainment.

The game will let players take control of their favourite characters from the Marvel universe, fighting back against the usual stable of villains. *CGM* had a chance to sit down with David Brevik before the game's June release to talk about how the game came to be and what sets it apart from other MMO's.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: It seems like such an obvious idea to do a Marvel mmo that it's kind of surprising one doesn't already exist, how did this come about?

David Brevik: Well Marvel's wanted to make an MMO for a while now, there's been some attempts that have not been very successful and then the IP was available. So Gazillion went out and licensed the IP and there was a lot of buzz about how I was really wanting to do this product and it was something I was really itching to do. So they called me up and said "Hey we got the Marvel license, do you want to come make a Marvel MMO?" and I just thought "Oh yeah I do." That was almost four years ago now. The idea came from, I wanted to try something different after making *Diablo* and *Diablo II*, get back to making action RPGs but I didn't want to make a very typical action RPG, like fantasy based or whatever. I wanted to stretch the bound of what could be done. And I took it not only in a gameplay direction by turning it into an MMO but also using an IP with superheroes and kind of setting it somewhere still fantasy, but more real world kind of setting. There's superheroes with powers that they can do that nobody else can do, Hulk picking up cars and throwing them or characters flying and things like that, versus "I've got a new sword, I've got a shield." Taking that and combining it all together into this unique experience. I've been wanting to do this for a while.

CGM: With a big stable of characters to pick from, how are they being made to play uniquely?

DB: We'll have 22 characters you can play at launch, and in a lot of ways you can think of each one as its own character class. The same kind of design philosophies apply as when I made *Diablo* and *Diablo II*. You could concentrate on spears or you could concentrate on bows, those kind of things. That same kind of philosophy applies to these character classes, we have a power tree that has three different paths. Cyclops might have a tree dedicated to his lasers or you could have a tree dedicated to leadership abilities or things like that. So he could be the way you want to play and the way I want to play. Lots of variety in the way you want to play your particular character and lots of customization.

CGM: You mentioned 22 characters at launch, are those available right from the get go to all players?

DB: They're all available at launch. The game is completely free to play. You can unlock all the characters, you can unlock nearly all, 99 per cent of all the costumes. The only ones you can't are reserved for our pre-

sale program, but other than that you can get them all. The selection of characters you have at the very beginning is limited. There's only five different characters you start out with, but you can find different ones in the game and unlock them with character tokens or you can buy a specific hero that you want to start with if you're sure you want to play as, say, Spider-Man.

CGM: When you were thinking about making a game in the online space, what gap was there that you thought this game could fill?

DB: A lot of things. To me an MMO is a massive multiplayer online game but that doesn't mean it's like *WoW* (*World of Warcraft*) or like *Everquest*. So many games went down that path and when we started out there were examples of successful MMO's that are not clones of that kind of direction, so I wanted to keep breaking the mold that way. *EVE* is an example of a massive multiplayer game that isn't strictly the *WoW* or *Everquest* type model. I wanted to get away from it in that way, but we could also break some rules because it is free-to-play. A lot of massive multiplayer games take a tremendous amount of time, and that's because it's a subscription. The longer the game goes the longer you're subscribing, but we don't have to adhere to that model. How fast you level or things like that could be different in our game, we have hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of hours of content but you don't have to grind up levels. Levelling is a side effect of what we're doing, not the point of what we're doing. And I also wanted to get away from the standard quest structure of "kill seven wolves and pick four apples" and go with quests that really mean something as you play through the story. In a lot of ways the game is much more like *Diablo II* where there's a storyline as you traverse through different areas to uncover what's going on. It's a very different levelling experience, it's a very different scale experience, but it's a very deep game with lots of things to do. It plays more like *Diablo II* than it does an MMO. Until you're in the game and you realize "oh my god there's a bunch of people in here that I can trade with and chat with, and group with, and do public events with" that makes it that real MMO experience.

CGM: You have a lot of experience with action RPGs obviously, but do you ever want to give another genre a go? Do you ever get worried that your games will just fall into the "plays like Diablo II" category?

DB: [laughs] Sure, I want to make other games other than *Diablo II* type games. But it really isn't that bad a game to be good at. It's my bread and butter, I'm very passionate about this genre, I'm very passionate about this kind of game. And so in that way it was something that we really wanted to focus on. I wanted to get back to my roots. The last game that I made was *Hellgate London*, which I'm very proud of but it was not like this. There were a couple mistakes I made that I really wanted to learn from. I wanted to get back to the type of skilled direction that I had with *Diablo*.

CGM: The characters in this game are all recognizable names, can you have more than one of the same character running around? How does that work?

DB: Yes. If you want to make a guild called "The Bubs" and run around as a pack of Wolverines, we're gonna allow you to do that. We've done several things in the game, first off there are hundreds of different costumes in the game. So my Deadpool could be wearing a pirate costume and talking like a pirate. Your Deadpool is going to be wearing his X-Force costume. So even though it's the same character they can look radically different. They will play very differently. If I am using my Wolverine to jump around the screen a bunch, your Wolverine

is focused on bleeds and stuff. So the way they're skilled and the way that they're playing and moving around the screen and things like that will be very different from each other. And then if that still isn't enough, one revolutionary feature we've got is that you can switch which character you're playing at any time in the game. You can just bring up the roster, say "no there's too many Spider-Men on the screen for me right now I'm going to switch to the Hulk" and switch to that character.

CGM: How much control has Marvel given you?

DB: There are a couple limitations. Limitations like, we can't have Hulk flying or something like that. It has to be within their IP. None of us as fans of the IP would want to make Hulk fly, that just doesn't make sense. We have the ability to creatively come up with all sorts of skills, but they have to fit the character. We're going to design these characters to feel and play and look like the characters we know and love. When we're doing skill design we definitely focus on the abilities of that particular character. We have lots of freedom though and Marvel's been very helpful, not only just in skill design, but they've given us access to a whole bunch of people. Brian Michael Bendis wrote the story. We've used a variety of Marvel artists, we have about an hour worth of motion comics in the game. We've got a bunch of people doing the voice work from the movies to the animated series. The *Iron Man 3* model that they used for the movie, they sent it to us to use it and scale it down and put it in our game so it's exactly as it can be.

CGM: Was there ever any talk of letting the player make their own hero?

DB: All along it was, you're gonna play as the Marvel heroes and not create your own. There were several reasons for this. First and foremost, being a Marvel fan, I want to play the heroes that have history and relationships that makes for a deeper experience. If I'm creating my own Captain Fancy Pants, nobody knows anything about his relationship with anybody else and it doesn't give the depth that I was looking for. Not only that but you inevitably get people that think "I'm gonna make The Hurk instead of the Hulk," and you're gonna get characters that are just like the Hulk but they can't be. We wanted you to be the heroes and not play as like a sidekick. In the end it's really not a big deal. You run around and see somebody else that's the same character, you don't even think twice about it. We've had no feedback from players that it's an issue at all.

CGM: It's called Marvel Heroes, where are the villains?

DB: [laughs] That would be fun wouldn't it. Some of our guys are grey area guys like The Punisher that have traditionally been on the fence as to whether they're villains or heroes. There are a few characters we have like that, but this is the beginning. We're going to be up for years and there's lots of places we can go, but that's all I'm going to say about that. CGM

The State of Comics Summer 2013

Words by Nicole Rodrigues

We're only halfway through 2013 and it's already been a jam-packed year in comics. We've seen industry legends like Geoff Johns say goodbye to characters he breathed new life into almost ten years ago with his final issue on *Green Lantern*, and the hugely anticipared Mark Millar and Frank Quitely collaboration finally come to light in *Jupiter's Legacy*. Marvel NOW brought new fans and haters to their universe with some shocking twists, the most dramatic befalling everyone's favourite web-head, the now *Superior Spider-Man*, while Image, still riding the high of record setting series' like *Walking Dead* and *Saga*, dug their heels in and maintained market share with quirky new releases *East of West* and *Ten Grand*. Whether you're a fan of capes or plainclothes heroes, a trade paperback enthusiast or weekly addict, here's the best comics so far this year, plus a few to look forward to.

It's a lot easier to write one story really well on your own schedule, than work with tight deadlines that may compromise that story's quality. That's what makes these ongoing series stand out: issue-to-issue, month-to-month, these creative teams have delivered top-notch content all through 2013 (and some long before that). In no particular order, here are my top titles best served on a weekly basis:

Captain Marvel - Kelly Sue continues to deliver the best-written heroine in years, as she struggles to find a balance between day-to-day life, superhero-ing and a shocking illness.

Saga - The spectacular origin story of Hazel, an infant travelling through space with mixed-species parents who found love in each other, despite their respective nations being at war. Love, hate, action and adventure, this series has it all.

Batman - Scott Snyder and Greg Capullo's Batman has been fantastic since the New 52 debut but soared during the recent Death of the Family event. Chilling and brutally emotive, it remains some of the best Batman out there.

Hellboy in Hell - Mike Mignola returns to writing and illustrating Hellboy, and it's been the most engrossing Big Red story in years, all taking place in the darkest reaches of Hell.

Hawkeye - Matt Fraction and David Aja can do no wrong in this clever series that brings humour and depth to the underrated Avenger.

Some stories have a set beginning, middle and end: they don't need years to say everything they have to. These miniseries achieve greatness in short time.

Daredevil: End of Days - David Mack and Brian Michael Bendis' love letter to Daredevil and his villains, with little to no inclusion of the man himself: apropos as it focuses on the aftermath of his death.

Comeback - Time travel done right by Ed Brisson and Michael Walsh, focusing on a shady agency that tinkers with the timeline for the right price.

Strange Attractors - Charles Soule and Greg Scott bring New York City to life in a new way: an ecosystem affected by minor events, predicted through complexity math. Fascinating interpretation of what heroes can be.

Before Watchmen: Dr Manhattan/Ozymandias - Two very different series that are both visually striking and emotionally complex, inspired by one of the best graphic novels of all time but bringing a new understanding of each character to fans.

Promising new series that you can still jump on the weekly bandwagon with:

Young Avengers - Perhaps the best superhero book geared towards teens and adults alike, Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie are at the top of their game: putting loveable characters in humorous yet deadly situations, and proving these teen heroes are stronger than everyone thought. Also, bacon.

Suicide Risk - What happens when everyday people get powers, but heroes dwindle every day? That's what Mike Carey and Elena Casagrande explore in this series, with unexpected results.

The Black Beetle - Francesco Francavilla's modern pulp masterpiece is thrilling, moody and absolutely stunning. Tune in to Colt City Radio, you won't be disappointed.

The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys - Gerard Way's triumphant return to comics (this time with Becky Cloonan illustrating), *Killjoys* creates its own genre in the superhero landscape: a bit of anarchy, nostalgia and offbeat concepts create something wonderful the same way Umbrella Academy did, but with a different feel.

Justice League Dark

Whether tragically cut short like Jason Latour and Nic Klein's spectacular run on *Winter Soldier*, or coming to a natural but long anticipated finale like Joe Hill and Gabriel Rodriguez's *Locke & Key*, 2013's weekly casualties become trade-paperback wins. Pick up both titles as collected editions, and if you hurry, you might catch up in time to read the two oversized finale issues of *Locke & Key: Alpha* out this August.

So what does this summer hold for comic fans? The upcoming *Trinity War* is one of DC's biggest scheduled events of 2013, bringing all three iterations of the Justice League together in what promises to be an epic scale battle. Justice League vs. Justice League America vs. Justice League Dark: that's a lot of *Just* heroes clashing. Based on the massive, interlocking splash cover, it looks like the battle may focus on the mysterious Pandora— a major player in the Flash Point event that led into the New 52 relaunch. Once *Trinity War* wraps up this summer, DC's bad guys take the spotlight in September with the launch of Villains Month. An event about DC's top scoundrels featuring 3D motion covers and a new decimal point numbering system makes for an unholy trinity war of gimmicks. That being said, it's an interesting concept, and some of the covers are pretty darned cool (though the Green Arrow Count Vertigo motion image makes the most thematic sense for the new format). The "23.1" style decimal numbering is guaranteed to confuse some fans but is actually not that complicated: if you're already reading Green Arrow, the ".1" issue will still exist in Ollie's world but will focus on Count Vertigo instead of your favourite archer. It's a great way to integrate new stories about the big bad into an ongoing series, so regular readers won't

The upcoming Trinity War is one of DC's biggest scheduled events of 2013, bringing all three iterations of the Justice League together in what promises to be an epic scale battle.

Superior Foes of Spider-Man

Sex Criminals

miss out and casual readers' interest may be piqued by shift of focus. As if that wasn't enough, Villains Month also leads into DC's next event, "Forever Evil", which promises more spotlight time for the bad guys.

Not to be outdone, Marvel's *Infinity* event launches this August with its own miniseries. If you able to snag a copy of the Free Comic Book Day *Infinity* one shot, you already know that a giant war affecting heroes on Earth and in space is revealed, including the return of Thanos (as the *Thanos* miniseries has built towards). Several other titles will tie into *Infinity*, including more *Guardians of the Galaxy* mini-series' launching in the summer. If Thanos isn't your thing, there'll be lots of supplementary Spider-books swinging into stores this summer too, with the *Superior Foes of Spider-Man*, *Superior Spider-Man Team Up* and *Superior Carnage* mini series' all kicking off in July and continuing into the fall.

Looking for something to get excited about outside of the Big Two's offerings? Why not head down to the Image Expo 2013 and experience the big announcements in person! Taking place July 2, in San Francisco, the expo will debut Image's line-up of Next Big Things, and feature appearances from some of their most prolific creators (e.g. Robert Kirkman, Ed Brubaker, and J. Michael Straczynski to name a few). Can't afford the trip? Get excited in the comfort of your own home about Image's upcoming summer titles, including two Matt Fraction creations I personally can't wait to get my grubby paws on: *Satellite Sam* with Howard Chaykin (a noir mystery set in 1951 about the death of a TV star in a seedy flophouse) and *Sex Criminals* with Chip Zdarsky (the story of two bank robbers who can stop time when they have sex). Sounds like the summer of sexy for Fraction series'.

How about something a little more kid friendly? *Itty Bitty Hellboy* debuts in August and it is the most demonically adorable book I've ever seen. IDW promises a whole slew of Cartoon Network character series for this fall, including *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Samurai Jack* and *Johnny Bravo*— something this big kid finds very exciting! Archaia's *Mouse Guard* may be too graphic for some of the littler ones, but Volume 2 of *Legends of the Guard* (featuring contributions from Stan Sakai, Bill Willingham and more) is a stunning hardcover collection also scheduled for this fall.

Even I can't keep up with everything out there, and there are dozens of acclaimed series in my To Read pile this summer: *Mind MGMT*, *The Manhattan Projects*, *Rachel Rising*, *Peter Panzerfaust*, *Chew* and *Unwritten* to name a few. Whatever you're looking for in a comic, there's guaranteed to be something right up your alley. So visit your local comic book store and take a look at some of the series mentioned above, but while you're there strike up a conversation with other fans, and pick up something new to accompany you on sunny patios all summer long. If you need me, I'll be the gal sitting in the sun, nose deep in a trade paperback with a pint at my side. Happy reading, True Believers! CG

REVIEWS

SCORE GUIDE

90 - 100
Games with little to no flaws that provide an exceptional entertainment experience. New high watermarks of quality or design are established with such titles, and these games are must-haves for fans of the genre as well as good places for newcomers to start.

80 - 89
Games that manage to provide a good, entertaining experience with only small flaws that are overlooked by the polish or innovation of the title. Both fans and newcomers to the genre will likely find something to appreciate here.

70 - 79
Games that manage to keep mechanical, technical and design flaws to a minimum while providing a solid experience. Generally enough to satisfy but not impress fans or gamers outside the genre.

60 - 69
Games that manage to get it mostly right functionally, without ever really moving beyond that. Flaws present can still have an impact on the experience. Fans of the genre and more tolerant gamers can enjoy these titles.

50-59
Games that meet the minimum requirements of functionality, but just barely. Mechanical, technical and design problems are still present, though not to the point of complete unplayability. Only desperate fans would see value in these titles.

Below 50
Games that fail to meet even the most basic requirements of entertainment and competence with serious mechanical and/or design flaws. Avoid at all costs.

REVIEWS

Last of Us

Grid 2

Remember Me

Metro: Last Light

Resident Evil: Revelations

Dust 514

MINI REVIEWS

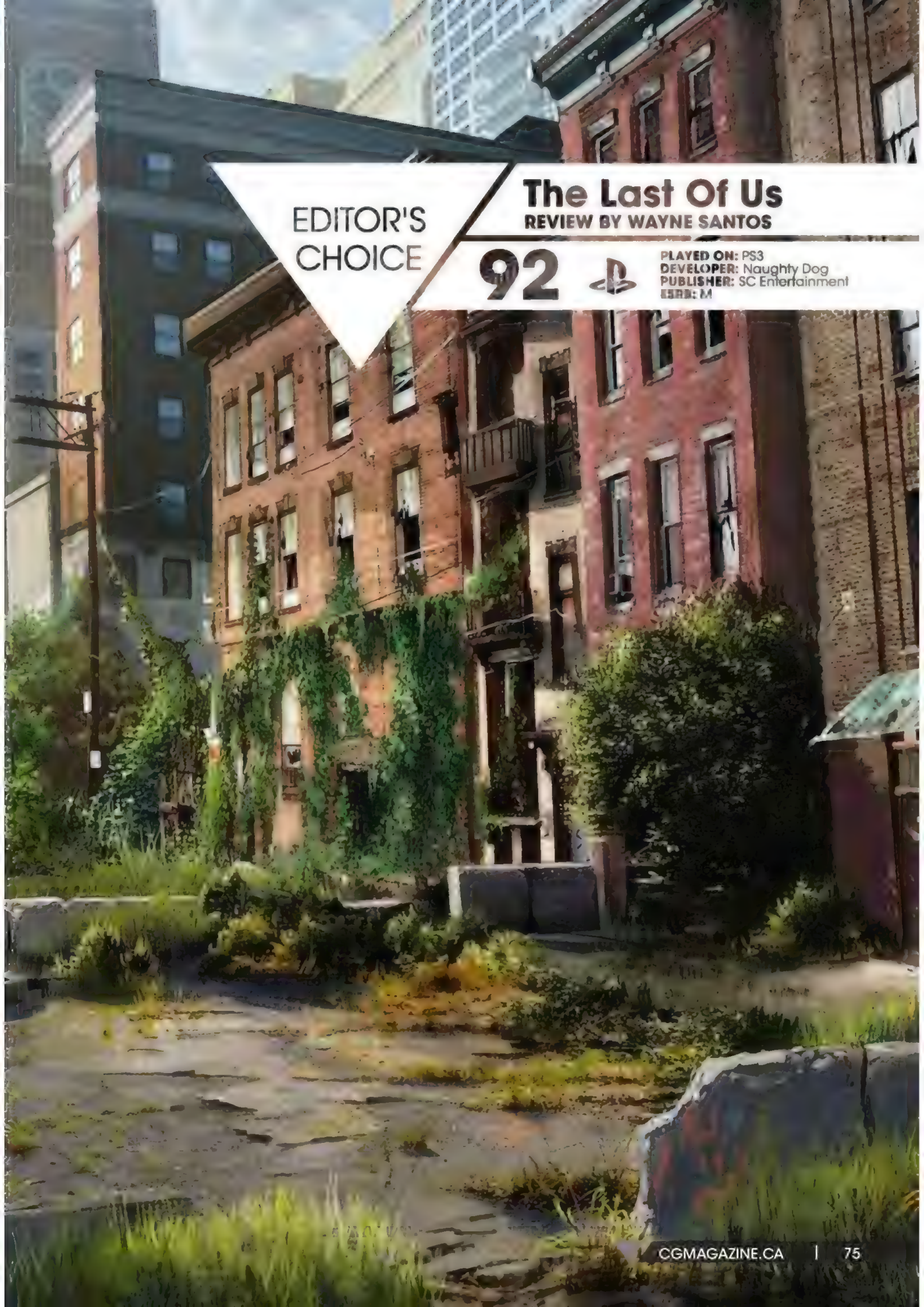
MGR: Blade Wolf

Borderlands 2: Tiny Tina's Assault on Dragon's Keep

COMICS

Kick-Ass 3 #1

Avengers vs. X-Men Companion



EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Last Of Us

REVIEW BY WAYNE SANTOS

92

PLAYED ON: PS3
DEVELOPER: Naughty Dog
PUBLISHER: SC Entertainment
ESRB: M

Kevin Smith—via Ben Affleck—once said in *Jay & Silent Bob Strike Back*, "You gotta' do the safe picture. Then you can do the art picture." Naughty Dog has made three safe and very profitable "pictures" with the *Uncharted* series. Each title is a familiar, conventional, roller coaster ride that leaves players thrilled and at ease with the world and their place in it. Uncharted is comfort food. Then we get to *The Last of Us* and it is clear that this is the game Naughty Dog has been wanting to make but needed the clout to do without interference. It is not safe, comfortable or reassuring to the typical gamer. It may actually be somewhat offensive to that demographic. It also happens to be one of the best games of the generation and is an example to others of how to merge narrative and interaction into an unforgettable package.

The End Of The World

The Last of Us is a post-apocalyptic tale, but one with a premise unique to the genre. After a prologue that will undoubtedly go down as one of the most gut wrenching in years, the game proper begins, 20 years after the outbreak of a humancentric Cordyceps virus. The Cordyceps virus is a fungus that grows in the brain, first turning the host into a rage crazy homicidal maniac, before gradually morphing into a blind cannibal that clicks like a bat as a form of echo location to track prey. Joel is the gruff smuggler turned guardian of the story; a man who's lost too much and is now compelled to escort 14 year old Ellie across the USA in a bid for a new, desperate hope for a human race that is clearly in the twilight of its existence. On the way, Joel and Ellie contend with horrors both human and mutant, undertaking a journey that is the most surprisingly compassionate, sophisticated and unsentimental examination of father/daughter relationships ever seen in a game.

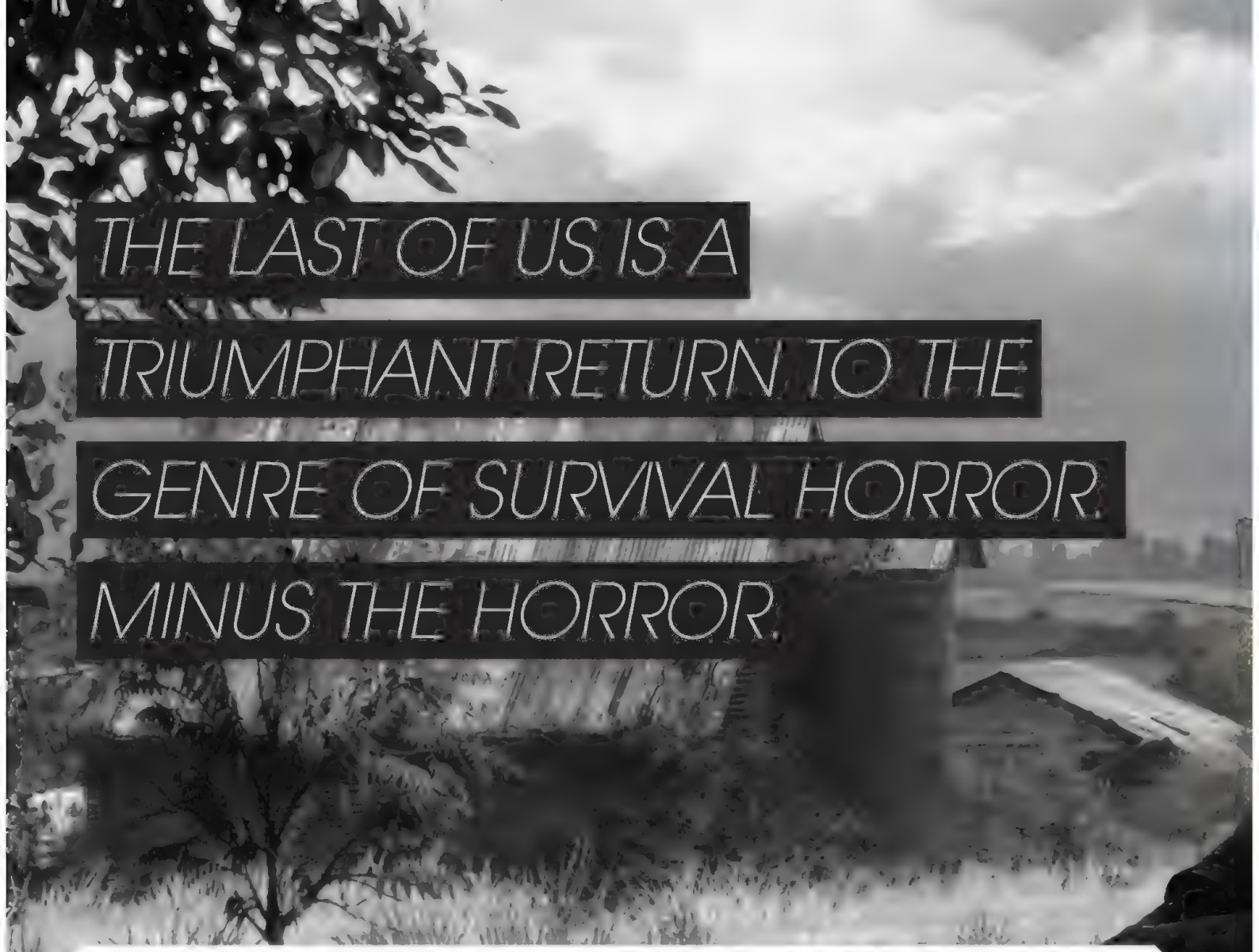
In that regard, *The Last of Us* truly is something special. The likes of David Cage with *Heavy Rain* and Brendan McNamara with *L.A. Noire* have aspired to the creation of immersive, cinematic games. But Naughty Dog's writer and creative director, Neil Druckmann, has finally nailed it, with a tale that invokes the bleakness of *The Road* and the speculative social insight of *Children of Man*. Druckmann has written every *Uncharted* game to date for Naughty Dog, but *TLoU* makes it clear that he's capable of much more than a snappy buddy story. People will be discussing and arguing the ending of this game in the years to come, and not because it's bad, but because it's so human and divisive.

The graphics, as to be expected from Naughty Dog, are top notch. The *Uncharted* engine is in clear and evident use, though the rich jungle colours have been muted for the post-apocalyptic setting. Frame rates are steady throughout, with some nice detail that shows

One of the best games of the generation.

the PS3 is being pushed just about as far as it can go. The big nod of respect however, goes to the art team. They went above and beyond, crafting a wide range of non-repeating environments, each one telling a different, silent story, so that the ransacked bedroom of a child carries a different look and feel from the dorm room of a female college student. Aside from some movie/music posters and the ubiquity of a fictional coffee chain called "Rivers Café" *TLoU* tries not to reuse assets as excessively as most games would.

The audio is also a thing of beauty and may be one of the best sounding games this year. The music, scored by *Brokeback Mountain's* Gustavo Santaollala is rural, minimalist, and often doesn't play at all, taking a back seat to the ambient noises of the environment. When it does play, it perfectly captures the spare, emotionally charged atmosphere of the game. The voice acting is also some of the best seen in a game. Troy Baker has already proven his "surrogate dad" chops in *BioShock Infinite* but he outdoes himself in this game as Joel, as does Ashley Johnson as Ellie. If there were awards for best acting in a game, Baker would win. The sound effects are also impressive. Shotguns have an amazing, bass shattering force to them and because silence is often important to survival, even the tiniest noise, like a glass bottle tipping, has a crispness and clarity to make players cringe when one falls over in the middle of a crucial sneaking section.



THE LAST OF US IS A TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO THE GENRE OF SURVIVAL HORROR. MINUS THE HORROR.

Y'All Are Gonna' Die

The *Last of Us* is a triumphant return to the genre of survival horror, minus the horror. There are moments of fright in the game, but it's not specifically focused on a horror experience, so maybe "survival survival" is more appropriate. Like *Resident Evil* games of yore, this is a third person action game, where the characters is weak, ammunition and other supplies are sparse. Every combat encounter is a tense affair because every shot needs to count, and going "Rambo" every time guarantees that the next encounter will be fought only with fists. In many ways this is the game that Ubisoft's *I Am Alive* aspired to become.

The combat is still cover based, and feels very much like *Uncharted*, but the ammo conservation issue means that gun confrontations deplete precious rounds quickly. In another nod to old school gaming, regenerating health has been removed, forcing players to be even more risk averse about shoot outs. This is where *Metal Gear Solid* style stealth becomes critical. Players can sneak about the environment, either strangling enemies—which consumes no ammo—or taking them out with knives and other melee weapons thus consuming some of their durability and hastening their break down.

It should be obvious by this point that this is *not* a game for traditional run and gunners. This is a game obviously targeted at the hardcore gamers that miss the days of tension that came with being a character of limited power and means. *The Last of Us* is not a power fantasy enabling people to feel like a god of guns. Instead, it is a harrowing experience where even a simple task like trying to find medical supplies becomes a desperate struggle against either human or Cordyceps infected opponents.

Crafting also comes into play, with Joel collecting various items for use in building everything from more medical kits to makeshift weapons like Molotov cocktails and nail bombs. Once again, Naughty Dog has added some tension to even this mechanic as players can only create a maximum of three items per type, and crafting takes time. Even the use of medical packs takes time as Joel desperately bandages and treats injuries, leaving Joel totally vulnerable for precious seconds, as does making a Molotov if he runs out in the middle of a fight. Weapons and even skills have an RPG-lite system of upgrading so guns can be modded to hold more rounds, and abilities like steadier targeting or faster crafting time can

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make Joel more efficient in combat.

There's also a gutsy decision to pace *The Last of Us* as a more methodical game of exploration and survival in addition to combat. Again, it's a move that will alienate the A.D.D. *Call of Duty* crowd, but in *The Last of Us* it's not all about fighting. Naughty Dog has crafted one of the most beautiful and saddening examples of a post-apocalyptic setting, and they're willing to slow things down, allowing Joel to simply explore—and occasionally solve puzzles in—a world where humanity is no longer in charge. Some will violently argue that exploration—of both the environmental and character/moral kind—has no place in a game, but Naughty Dog has pulled it off beautifully, making the contrast with the brutal combat that much more intense.

And then, finally, there is Ellie. Like Elizabeth of *BioShock Infinite* this is a young, plucky woman who is the basis of an "escort mission" that comprises the entire game. And like Elizabeth, she is an NPC companion that doesn't get in the way, and eventually becomes more and more important to the player not just as a character but as a game mechanic. She won't be throwing coins or med-packs at Joel, but she will distract enemies, take part in combat and help solve puzzles. She is another example of an NPC done right and her developing self-reliance proves not just useful as a game mechanic but crucial to the story. Her humour (or attempts at it), spirit, and genuine trust and affection for Joel all seamlessly blend into a relationship that carries beyond cut scenes and into gameplay itself.

So it is with some disappointment that even though I actually prefer *The Last of Us* to *BioShock Infinite* I'm going to be scoring it lower. We weren't granted access to the multiplayer, which didn't go live until the game's release, so it's impossible to say whether it adds value to the game (though with Naughty Dog's success with *Uncharted* multiplayer it's not such a huge risk). However, it does mean that unlike *BioShock Infinite* which was reviewed as a complete package, *The Last of Us* is not.

What it is, however, is an engaging, necessary experience that brings back the tension of survival horror gameplay. The slower pace and more unforgiving combat will turn off *Call of Duty* players, but for the hardcore that want one of the best stories of the generation with varied, immersive gameplay, this is a no brainer. *The Last of Us* is one of the best games of the generation, and if you have a PS3, must add this game to your collection. CG

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Grid 2

REVIEW BY PHIL BROWN

80 PC

PLAYED ON: PS3
DEVELOPER: Codemasters
PUBLISHER: Codemasters
ESRB: E

I have to admit that my knowledge of professional racing is essentially limited to many viewings of *Day Of Thunder* ("rubbin' is racing") and the old Canada's Wonderland simulator based on it. That's why the much beloved *Gran Turismo* has always left me feeling cold. I recognize that it's one of the most beautifully crafted franchises on the market and that the physics are remarkably realistic. However, it always feels like I'm playing the most gorgeous and expensive way possible to drive around in a circle. That makes me not the greatest person to sample *Grid 2* and also someone who has a surprising appreciation for the game. This is a title very much rooted in the racing world and designed with an almost anal attentive attention to detail on all technical levels. But there is still a slice of arcade racer inside that allows you to get a touch more goofy joy out of the proceedings than simply playing the world's finest racing simulator. I'm sure that *Gran Turismo* gearheads will scoff at that assessment and dismiss me with a "good day sir!" But for anyone else out there like me who finds that franchise a little boring, *Grid 2* is a noble substitute.

Five years after the award-winning original, *Grid 2* returns with the basic elements that made the last game such a success without simply repeating the formula. In particular, the single player mode has been overhauled with a fairly creative concept. It's another fictionalized racing league, but this time one that you're joining from the ground up. You play as a hot shot young racer (at this point the *Days Of Thunder* theme started blaring in my head) who has been invited to join a new league called World Series Racing (and then the theme stopped...for a bit). You travel the globe, gradually finding more fans until the WSR is one of the major racing leagues. Essentially, it's just a gimmick to get you globe-trotting to all the tracks the designers whipped up, but every now and then videos pop up to further the story. It's completely non-intrusive and actually rather fun. At first you're simply watching youtube videos and social media feeds for the WSR and seeing popularity grow. By the end there's full ESPN coverage of the exciting new league and the stands are filled with adoring fans (plus the cars are better, the opponents are stronger, etc.). It's not much of a story, but just enough for this type of game. Racing gamers don't want to be bogged down with plot, but it is nice to have a little something connecting one race to the next and the WSR concept works quite nicely at building excitement and scale gradually.

That increased level of scale and importance placed on the story is a big bonus because one of *Grid 2*'s big weaknesses is the relatively small spattering of tracks. Now these tracks are beautiful and functional, with

a nice variety of city and country escapades. Most of them are exciting and varied, with only a few stinkers (oddly enough in Hong Kong, which seems like a place filled with visual possibilities that were oddly ignored). The trouble is that as you keep expanding the popularity of the league, you end up repeating the same tracks over. Granted, the prime time sports network intro and increased number of fans adds a little extra excitement, but not enough to hide the fact that you're running through the same track yet again with different cars and opponents.

Even though we're nearing the end of a gaming generation and the software should be starting to feel dated, a well designed HD game can still pack a nice visual punch and Grid 2 is no exception.

Of course most folks playing *Grid 2* won't care about those things. They'll only care about the cars and the driving. Well good news, gearheards, that's what Codemasters gets right. Even though we're nearing the end of a gaming generation and the software should feel dated, a well designed HD game can still pack a nice visual punch and *Grid 2* is no exception. The car models are all crisply and accurately designed and the tracks feels massive and varied. It's the small details where the visuals really shine though like the clear reflections

on the shiny car hoods, puffs of dust n' debris in the air, and flares from cameras in the stands during races. These little touches make a huge impact on the game's immersion and it's all too easy to get sucked into this little beauty while faux-racing along. The sound design is also well played with just the right amount of engine roars and squeals tires to pull you into the world without overkill, while music pops up only in dramatic moments to increase tension. On a technical level, *Grid 2* is a hell of an achievement and that's a key component is this brand of racing game thanks to the *Gran Turismo* gold standard.

On a technical level, Grid 2 is a hell of an achievement and that's a key component is this brand of racing game thanks to the Gran Turismo gold standard.

The racing physics are where the game might lose some of the hardcores. Overall it's fairly well balanced, but the design does lean heavily towards drifting and fast-paced arcade style gameplay that will irritate purists. It's still realistic enough that you'll have to think a few moves ahead to succeed, but not so much that it becomes all-consuming. There's also a nice flashback mode that allows you to replay stupid mistakes, but it never feels quite as fully integrated and explored as it should to truly be a key component in the game. There's a nice allotment of cars to peel around in, fitted with recognizable designs and suitably souped up cores. Unfortunately (for some players) customization is limited primarily to multiplayer which could be a problem if that's not one of your favourite aspects of this genre. It's not for me, so I actually enjoyed not having to worry about it much, but I'm sure plenty of folks out there will cry "foul" followed by a waterfall of tears.

Multiplayer is well designed even though it still suffers from the limited number of tracks and an inability to share custom designed hotrods. Some may also complain that online folks will try to turn races into an explosion packed demolition derbies rather than the meticulous careful driving favoured in single, but I could care less. I like when things blow up real good. Other than that, there's a nice variety of racing styles based on game mode and racing locals (The US is heavy straightforward lap races, while Asia is focused on drifting. Just like *Fast And The Furious*, a franchise that is a stunningly accurate depiction of the international racing scene). Overall, it's a very nice racing game with gorgeous design a clever single player and enjoyable multiplayer component. It is just a racing game though and that can be a fairly limited genre if you're not into it. But by now if you don't know what you're getting when you pick up a title like this, it's your fault and not the designers. So, if you're looking for a pretty and fairly realistic racing game without the punishing difficultly of a *Gran Turismo*, you just found it. Go out and buy it now, dummy! C&G

REMEBER ME

REVIEW BY REID McCARTER

70

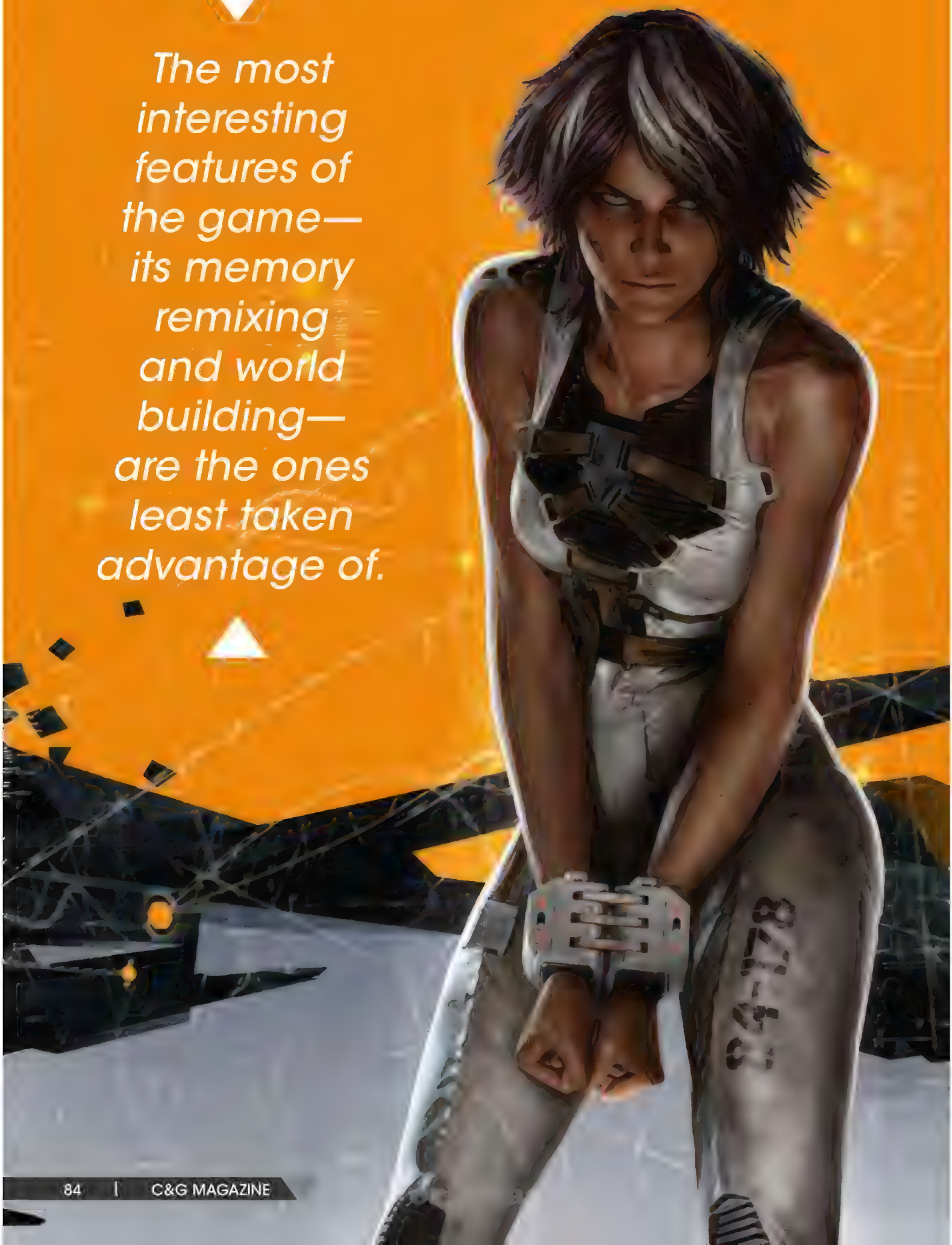
PC

PLAYED ON: PS3
DEVELOPER: DONTNOD Entertainment
PUBLISHER: Capcom
ESRB: M

Good science fiction creates future worlds in order to discuss issues important to the present day. *Remember Me*, an action adventure game set in 2084 Paris, does just this by looking at class disparity through a setting where the rich enjoy access to memory manipulation technology and the poor live in slums haunted by the monstrous cast-offs of this uneven system.

This story is the most successful element of *Remember Me* and, in light of its ambitious, but fairly disappointing gameplay mechanics, may be the only part of the game that truly warrants attention. DONTNOD, the developer of the game, does a good job of making players want to explore the fiction of Neo-Paris and the characters who populate it. This is helped by a strong opening that sees protagonist Nilin escaping from a mysterious prison and beginning the process of recovering her stolen memories by making her way through a beautifully designed city that drips with visual and narrative detail. By the time players have picked their way through a series of sewer tunnels and emerged into the daylight of a half-collapsed slum, it's likely that *Remember Me*'s striking aesthetic (Neo-Paris mixes the marble and cobblestone of historic French architecture with super sleek metal and holographic billboards) and story hooks will have provided enough enticement to compensate for the flawed combat and navigation sections.

The most interesting features of the game—its memory remixing and world building—are the ones least taken advantage of.



Even though *Remember Me*'s narrative is largely successful, the way it's told can be problematic. Silly, invented names for future technology are distracting—stored memories are "remembranes" and members of the underground resistance group Nilin works for are referred to as "Errorists." Much of the dialogue is clumsy and often made worse by lacklustre voice actors tasked with trying to deliver unconvincing lines. Though there are a few exceptions (Nilin's actor is very good) even the best actors are constantly hamstrung by having to attempt to humanize dialogue that almost always sounds overwritten and unnatural. None of the characters, barring Nilin, ever seem to develop as well as they should either. A lot of care has obviously gone into designing a colourful cast of enemies and supporting characters, but their personalities and motivations are never explored as fully as players might like. This is very evident in the celebrity "memory hunter" Kid X-Mas and troubled bounty hunter Olga Sedova. Both of these characters are extremely interesting although very shallowly portrayed, leaving players wishing for more detail. The story, while fascinating, is also not particularly well paced. *Remember Me*'s first and third acts are very strong, but the game drags throughout its middle portion. The plot loses its momentum during this section, asking players to maintain interest in rote missions that seem to have little to do with the larger narrative. This stretch is also filled with plenty of unimpressive combat sections that do little to help.

When Nilin has to take on a group of enemies, the encounters take the form of timing-based punch-ups reminiscent of (but not as good as) Rocksteady's *Arkham* series. The fighting mechanics are serviceable, but not satisfying. Though the game's soundtrack is wonderful, the same level of attention has not been paid to recording sound effects. There is hardly any audible feedback to signify the connection of Nilin's fist and the enemy's body, making timing button presses to attacks feel unresponsive and enemy encounters in general somewhat lifeless. This issue is somewhat lessened through *Remember Me*'s customizable combo system. Players earn attacks—"pressens"—that deal damage, recover health or boost the effects of connected moves. Stringing these moves together alters a given combo's effects. A health attack placed at the tail end of a combo heals Nilin more than it would if positioned as the first punch; likewise for the amount of damage that an attack move can deal relative to its spot in the combo. Unfortunately, this system never quite comes together as well as it should. The amount of customization available to players is limited to pre-set choices and later game fighting often features crowds of enemies who box in Nilin and make longer combinations extremely difficult.

Navigating Neo-Paris is also a bit disappointing. Nilin moves around the world by jumping across gaps, shimmying along edges and scaling objects protruding from the walls of the environment. The fact that players move about through gorgeous environments and to the accompaniment of an excellent orchestral soundtrack isn't enough to make the challenge-free climbing much fun, though. *Remember Me*'s levels are very linear and negotiating a climbing path is never particularly challenging. This wouldn't strike me as much of an issue if jumping from ledge to ledge felt as satisfyingly tactile as a *Tomb Raider* or *Uncharted*, but, just as in combat, there is a lack of weight to Nilin's movements.

The few segments that allow players to "remix" an enemy's memory are far more interesting. CG

Metro: Last Light was almost lost to gamers when THQ flashed a Game Over screen, but thankfully Deep Silver stepped up to make things right because it's a bloody, terrifying and at times rather beautiful good time with a gun. The game finds a nice balance between stealth n' machine gun FPS styles along with a spattering of surrealistic Silent Hill-style horror and a vividly unique world to create a deeply immersive experience. At times the game is a shoot em' up, at times it's a creep out survival horror, and occasionally it's a character-driven sci-fi think piece. The mix is just right to keep the game unpredictable and full of variety. Sure, there are flaws like some dodgy character animation and an episodic narrative that sputters out, but when *Metro: Last Light* is working it's an enthralling experience that feels closer to a big company marquee release than an indie attempt to crack the AAA market.

Ukrainian studio 4A Games kicked off this franchise with *Metro 2033*, an adaptation of Russian sci-fi novelist Dmitry Glukhovsky's post-apocalyptic chiller (that's right games from novels, that's a thing now). Glukovsky had already written a sequel, but wisely the game is its own story with the author's involvement. You play as the silent Artyom, one of the underground survivors of a nuke-scarred Moscow. With the surface city completely inhabitable thanks to an unfortunate mix of radiation and radioactive monsters (those ones are the worst!), humanity has taken to living in underground subway stations. The remaining humans are split into tribes who have taken over each station and use military grade ammo as currency. Most of the monsters are your usual winged semi-dragons, hairy beasts, oversized spiders, etc; however, there's a special breed called "The Dark Ones" who have psychic powers, Predator-style invisible camouflage, and generally superior ass-kicking abilities to the normie monsters. Most of those guys were taken out at the last game, but one baby remains and Artyom is sent out on a scouting mission to find it because they share a special psychic connection. Inevitably, it goes wrong and you're sent on an adventure through the underground Metro encountering various monsters and monstrous factions of humans.

The set-up and world of *Metro: Last Light* are fantastic. The story is second to the adventure and eventually fizzles out, but thankfully that's not enough to kill the game. The 4A designers have created such a remarkable world of rotting tunnels filled with equally rotting corpses and burned out cityscapes and filled that world with so many action scenarios and peculiar character beats that it's hard to care. Between each major set piece, you'll wander through a new tribe of humans,

Metro: Last Light

REVIEW BY PHIL BROWN

83 PC

PLAYED ON: PS3
DEVELOPER: 4A Games
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
ESRB: M

glimpsing sights like a shadow puppeteer struggling to come up with an animal the post-apocalypse children he's performing recognize. The game is filled with details like these and the human's shelters all feel distinct and lived in. There's a troupe of actors who perform for survivors of all factions, a communist revolution on the rise, a shantytown of gangsters, and even a Nazi cult determined to eradicate mutants. All are distinct and performed by talented voiceover artists with delightfully put-on Russian accents. Unfortunately, the developers didn't quite have the time or tech to do detailed facial animation that nails the characterization and that's a shame. Fortunately, 4A did ensure that there was enough going on at all times that you rarely focus directly on lip-reading or facial animation. The story formed through all the worlds might be episodic and tacked on, but the moment-to-moment immersion in the Metro world is so intense that you'll never notice.

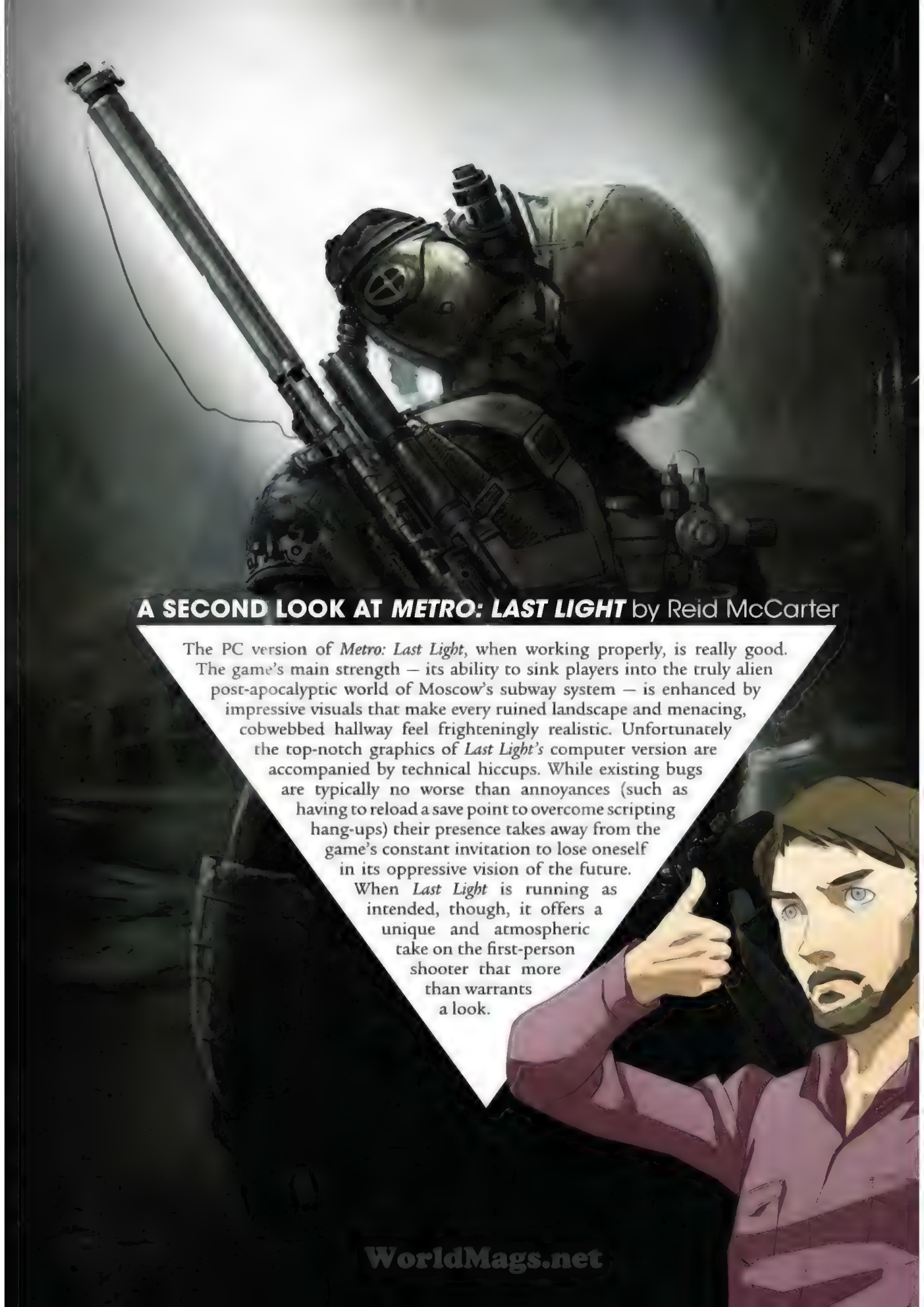
When you aren't wondering through one of these communities, you'll be either on the surface or in the connecting tunnels pursued by monsters (both literal and human). The designers really came through here too with shadowy atmospherics and disgusting corpse designs to give you the willies. They'll frequently toss in haunting horror gags like shadows with no source

The story is second to the adventure and eventually fizzles out, but thankfully that's not enough to kill the game.

to get in your head and it works wonders. Mixing horror with a FPS isn't easy, but works well here thanks to *Metro: Last Light's* sense of pacing. There are plenty of shootouts and stealth sections, yet they're always connected by creepy subterranean links where the level design demands you to take wrong turns for shock effects and battles could burst out at any minute. You'll constantly feel on guard and with ammo scarce and gas mask filters-fleeting on the surface. Survival horror is a constant presence and executed well. The visual design demands that it be played in the dark thanks to nearly constant flashlight and lighter lit sequences and the scares are so good you'll curse 4A for making you leap from your couch and feel wary of radioactive monsters in your bedroom. Yep, they done good.

Of course this being a FPS, that's where the meat and potatoes of gameplay is and fortunately it works well. Controls are responsive and there's a nice mix of stealth n' shoot em up. Any time human enemies need to be dealt with, you can hide in the shadows to slit throats for silent kills. It's fun and effective, but at times AI intelligence can be so daft that you'll stand face to face with someone who can't see you or slip a toe out of the dark and be spotted from across the room. Fortunately, the shooting gallery approach is just as fun with plenty of varied weapons to try out and ammo always in healthy supply. Frankly, unless you're overwhelmed with enemies, there's no point in cutting down the ranks with stealth because shooting them is so easy and far less time consuming. There are still plenty of tense moments and nice bonuses like blood getting splattered all over your mask that needs to be wiped off mid fight, but it's often easier just to plow through any shooting scenario like Arnie in *Commando* without fear of death. Difficulty can of course be adjusted for the hardcores (even mid-level), but on normal and easy modes getting through is more about persistence than skill building. Some of the elements added to increase difficulty like the gas mask filters that constantly need to be replaced are undermined by an abundance of refill availability that often prevents survival horror hoarding from coming into play.

Metro: Last Light isn't perfect, but, thankfully, all the flaws like inconsistent difficulty, a weak narrative, poor facial characterization, and the occasional choppy animation are mild distractions at worst. Overall, this is a pretty stellar mix of FPS and survival horror tropes that livens up both dwindling genres. The world is so cleverly conceived and exquisitely designed that it's often just as pleasurable to wander through and soak up the atmosphere as it is to machine gun an army of giant spider and/or Nazis. Given that killing giant spiders and Nazis are two of the primal joys of gaming, that's really saying something. The folks at 4A Games deserve to be commended for what they accomplished. Critically, I'm sure that will happen. Let's just hope that the sales follow. C&G



A SECOND LOOK AT *METRO: LAST LIGHT* by Reid McCarter

The PC version of *Metro: Last Light*, when working properly, is really good. The game's main strength — its ability to sink players into the truly alien post-apocalyptic world of Moscow's subway system — is enhanced by impressive visuals that make every ruined landscape and menacing, cobwebbed hallway feel frighteningly realistic. Unfortunately the top-notch graphics of *Last Light's* computer version are accompanied by technical hiccups. While existing bugs are typically no worse than annoyances (such as having to reload a save point to overcome scripting hang-ups) their presence takes away from the game's constant invitation to lose oneself in its oppressive vision of the future. When *Last Light* is running as intended, though, it offers a unique and atmospheric take on the first-person shooter that more than warrants a look.

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Resident Evil: Revelations

REVIEW BY PHIL BROWN

80

PLAYED ON: PS3
DEVELOPER: Capcom
PUBLISHER: Capcom
ESRB: M

Porting console games onto handheld systems is pretty common, going all the way back to the Game Boy. But upgrading a handheld title to a console? That doesn't happen every day. Yet, that's what Capcom decided to do with *Resident Evil: Revelations* and it's easy to see why. The title is easily one of the best to ever appear on the 3DS, pushing the graphics as far as that little system can handle and serving up a game so big that a special XL 3DS cartridge had to be specially designed to contain it. The game was so strong that reviewers such as myself claimed it was a console worthy experience available in the palm of your hand. Well, the good folks at Capcom decided to test that theory and now *Resident Evil: Revelations* is available on the PS3, Xbox 360, and the Wii U. The results are actually pleasantly surprising. Obviously, it's not perfect. That would have required a complete overhaul in certain areas that Capcom didn't do. This is the 3DS game with spiffed up graphics and if you don't have a 3DS it's definitely worth a look since this is one of the best chapters in the franchise this generation.

I won't bother getting into plot details since this is a *Resident Evil* game and it's therefore ridiculous, convoluted, and laughable. However, that's part of the charm of the series at this point. You play *Resident Evil* games for the top flight scares and design, while the silly plots and lines like "Me and my sweet ass are on the way" (actual line in *Revelations*) add a little bonus comedy value. The game takes place between *Resident Evil 4* and *5* and returns the series to its survival horror roots...for the most part. The bulk of the game is played as Jill Valentine on a creepy virus-infected cruise ship called The Queen Zenobia. It's been beautifully designed, filled with shadows and pockets of light along with plenty of monsters and loud jump scare level changes that make exploring the ship feel like a walk through a haunted house. It's arguably the best setting for an *RE* title since the Arklay mansion of the original and just like that game you'll be constantly concerned about having enough ammo to deal with enemies who just won't quit. At least that's true at first, towards the end the guns are so powerful and enemies so plentiful that it turns into an action/horror title like recent *RE* titles and along the way you'll play side quests that set up that action-focused style of gameplay. While some gamers might complain that the game should have focused on either action or survival horror, I liked the mix and felt it offered the best of all Resident Evil games in a single package.

There's also the usual Raid Mode, which fans of the series of come to know and love (or at least tolerate. In addition to the main story, you can simply dive into this mode at any time for quick blasts of monster killin' action without all that story and suspense to distract you. Raid mode can be played single player or through

online multiplayer and is a points-based shoot em' up with a variety of playable characters from the franchise and familiar stages from *Revelations* and others. It's not so satisfying an experience that it could stand on its own, but combined with the fantastic ten hour story it makes this game a robust package filled with replay value. However, I'd imagine if you're reading this review you either know all that or don't care. You want to know how this handheld title works on a big ol' HD TV. Well calm down folks, I was just about to get to that.

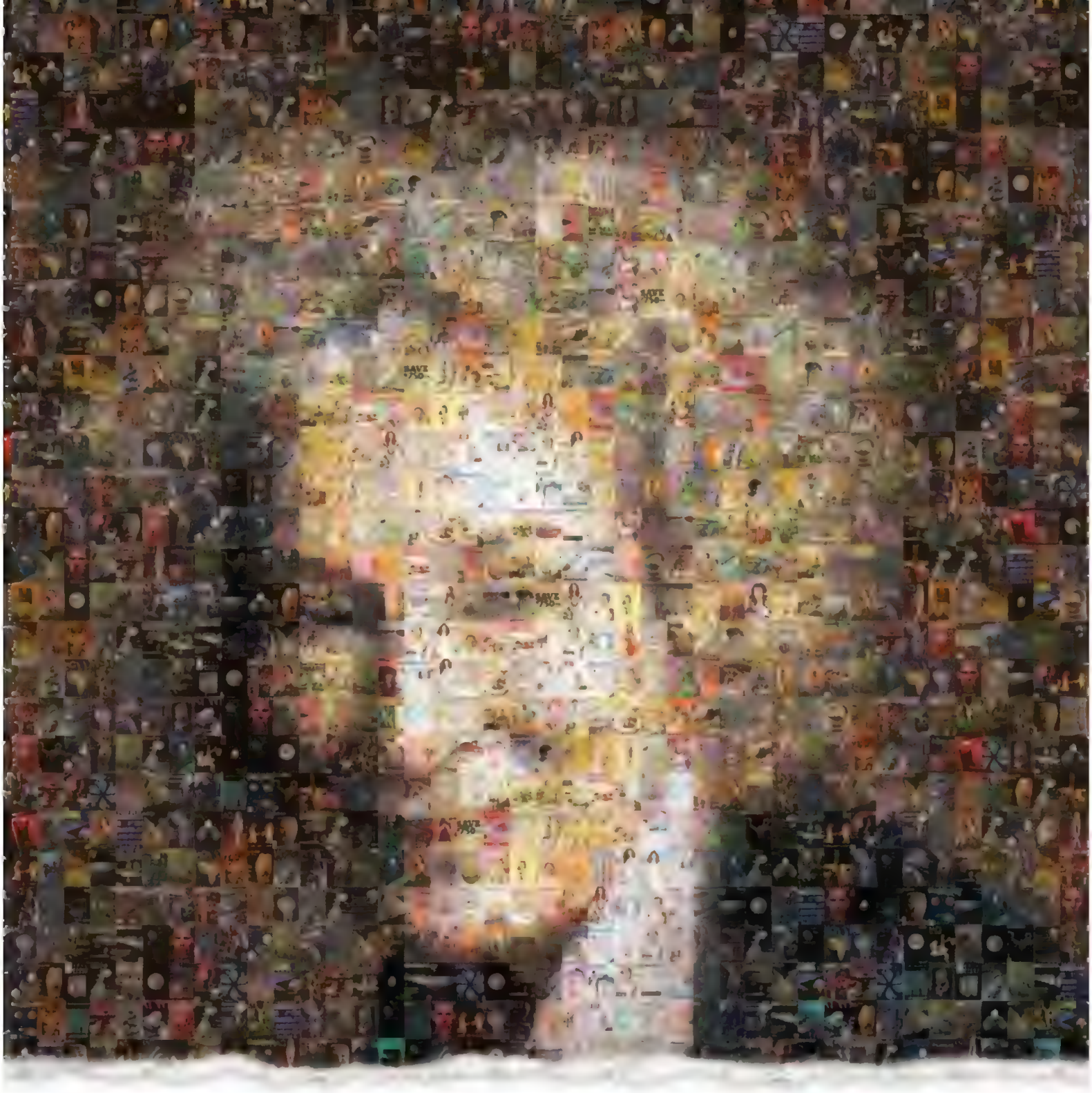
RE: Revelations is easily the prettiest game on the 3DS, leagues above anything else. In fact it was so good I always wondered if Capcom planned for ports and clearly I now have my answer. The HD upgrade is smooth and pretty. Now, if this had been designed purely for the HD consoles it might feel like a bit of a graphical letdown, but as a port, it looks damn good. It essentially looks the same as the 3DS version, just with added detail for screens about 100x larger than the tiny 3DS. Character models look absolutely beautiful as do most stages. Occasionally textures can be flat and grainy, which is to be expected from a game designed for such a small screen blown up so large. The strangest thing about playing it on a TV is how oversized everything appears. Characters were large on the screen and levels laid out to be big and open on the 3DS to compensate for the small screen. On a TV everything can feel a little awkwardly large compared

to the usual console game designs, but that's not anything particularly wrong with this version. It's just a bit jarring at first. Animation is fairly smooth for the most part, but occasionally characters hands can slip through walls or other bugs pop up when small moments meant to be barely visible are now blown up to the size of the original screen.

The game also retains the handheld's 12-chapter structure which broke the story down into 15-20 minute chunks made for portable gaming. I was initially concerned that would feel strange on the console version, but it's fine and the "previously on" montages that play before each chapter remain a hoot. Oddly the loading screens for both the cut scenes and levels are as long as they were on the 3DS, which feels like an oversight given how powerful the consoles are, but that's a minor annoyance at most. Personally, the biggest let down of the console version is to do with controls. Aiming can feel a bit fast and jumpy now that the screen size has expanded and the 3DS' brilliant use of the second screen for constant map display and instant access to weapons/items obviously isn't an option. Now pausing to access those things isn't a big deal and is even a staple of the franchise, but it does slow down the gameplay a tiny bit and was much missed (this obviously isn't a factor on the Wii U where the tablet touch screen replicates all of the 3DS touch screen functions). Other problems in translation that should have been addressed include the limited number of enemy designs and the absolutely brutal partner AI (they stand in a corner, shoot at noting for ten seconds, and repeat). These two issues could and should have been updated for this version since they are far less forgivable on a console, but Capcom clearly wanted this to be a streamlined 100 per cent port and they stuck to their guns.

If this were an original game design for the PS3 and Xbox 360, it would feel like there are major design faults that are unforgivable. However, as a 3DS-to-console port, it's a shock that more problems didn't come up in translation.

Playing through *Resident Evil: Revelations* again, it really does feel like one of the better chapters in this franchise that will clearly never end (and nor should it). The mix of ammo hoarding survival horror and Rambo-style action shoot em' ups works quite well and satisfyingly offers all things to all *Resident Evil* fans. As far as the port goes, all of my complains are of the whiny nitpick variety. If this were an original game design for the PS3 and Xbox 360, it would feel like there are major design faults that are unforgivable. However, as a 3DS-to-console port, it's a shock that more problems didn't come up in translation. If you've played and loved the 3DS version of this game, there's really no point in investing in it again as that remains the ideal system to play *Revelations*. However, if you're some crazy person who refuses to acknowledge the pure joy the 3DS provides, then this is an excellent way to experience a rather brilliant entry in the *RE* cycle that you would have missed otherwise. A few bells n' whistles to make this release unique would have been nice, but as a straight up port this sucker gets the job done. For better or worse this is *Resident Evil: Revelations* for HD TVs. If you like shooting monsters in the dark, you just found ten hours of bliss. CG



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GENUINE CANADIAN MAGAZINE

Dust 514

REVIEW BY ALEXANDER LEACH

82

PLAYED ON: PS3
DEVELOPER: CCP
PUBLISHER: CCP/Sony
ESRB: M

EVE Online has somewhat of a reputation for being a cutthroat, unforgiving game. So is *Dust 514*, a first-person shooter running parallel to the *EVE* universe with cross-game interaction, financial consequences for death, a complicated levelling system, the ability to capture planets, manage inter-corporate wars and even influence the NPC factions. The whole thing seems inaccessible to anyone who hasn't played the game before. But is it?

Not really.

A Universal Community

It's true that the game is intimidating, and I've not played a game before that justified the term. Its expansive skill trees, wide variety of gear and upgrades, and its world-affecting modes mix together to create a monstrously ornate game that, due to its focus on player-created content and factions, requires a huge investment of time to reach the upper echelons. However, the core gameplay is solid, and suitably engrossing as you delve into the finer points of the game.

The game is based around two-team versus matches. Ambush mode is the typical deathmatch-style play, with an OMS (Off Map Support) mode where artillery strikes can be called down. Domination mode has players fighting over a single, powerful cannon, which fires continuously on the enemy's base when a team holds it. The final mode is Skirmish, where players take and hold several cannon emplacements in order to bring down the enemy mobile command unit, like in Domination.

Skirmish mode is the core of the game in most respects. In Faction Warfare, the NPC empires fight for territory in the *EVE* section of the universe. *EVE* players can use their starships to bombard the planets from orbit, adding strategic strikes to the battlefield for whichever side they support. The second advanced mode, Planetary Conquest, actually focuses on defending or attacking territories on planets within the Eden system, the *Dust*-specific part of the setting. Territories produce money, as well as resources such as clones (the player bodies used to invade and defend). This part of the game is regulated to corporate heads, and was beyond my scope to try hands-on, but it essentially regulates whom corporations can attack and why. Planetary Conquest modes have a grace period depending on the result of its last attack, where it cannot be attacked, of about a day or two; corporations are constantly attacking each other. A lot of the empire management and *EVE*-bombardment, however, will be outside the scope of this review, as it's limited to high-end players who lead their own corporations.

Combat can become extremely hectic, especially in the Faction Warfare and Planetary Conquest. Cover and team support is paramount, so going in with a team-speak enabled group is necessary. You can die extremely easily to a more organized enemy, particularly with heavy, sniper, and vehicle support. It's also quite fun. Deaths reduce your 'clone reserve', which eventually limits your respawns, and causes you to lose any equipped gear (so bring spares). Battles feel dynamic and balanced, and I never came across anything that seemed gamebreakingly powerful.

The skill system is an interesting addition to the game, and ties directly to the role you play. While the game gives you a variety of skill-free equipment to try out, there's plenty of stuff that you won't be able to use until you specialize. Even vehicles require skill training. It's certainly impossible to max all of your skills, so you have to know what you want to play before you start buying. There is no real way to 're-spec' your points after you've spent them, so expect to do a lot of research or to join a corporation with a helpful guide document.

Skill points are earned in battle, but also passively accumulate over time. There's a cap on how many skill points you earn from matches in a week, which limits how much 'grinding' someone can do. This narrows the gap between those with a lot of time and those without, and is a great idea.

I am by no means an amazing gamer, but I never felt particularly weak even with the starter gear and low skills. There's definitely a gap between high-class equipment, fully-skilled behemoths and starter scrubs, but beginners can still injure and kill such veterans. Coordinated squads make all the difference – solo play is not the intent, though I was even able to have fun on Ambush by myself at times. You won't always be using the best gear, as well, to save money, but the difference is more of an issue in high-stakes matches (Faction and Planetary).

Graphically, there's little wrong with the game. I only had a few times where texture loading wasn't instantaneous. The aesthetic is appealing to look at, and the armour designs are impressive. There are several maps, which have various different buildings built across them each battle (in Planetary Conquest maps, they're based on the structures the owning corporation builds there), and they've got plenty of little alcoves and corridors to be had. It feels like an actual futuristic facility when you're ducking behind crates and into purification plants. The major downside I noticed, however, is the terrain itself – I've gotten stuck on terrain many times, often in places that seem like normal hills or inclines. There's some issues with clipping where you'll get stuck running into the corner of a box, unable to move as you get shot.

As a free-to-play game, there's obviously a lot of micro-transaction options, by purchasing Aurum. This isn't merely a better version of ISK, the game's standard currency – it's used for specific gear, which is usually better and easier to use than equivalent ISK gear. There are also skill boosters you can purchase, which let you accrue skill points faster than normal – these are far more useful than the Aurum gear, in my opinion. Some Aurum gear come in permanent blueprints, which means you don't have to repurchase, but a lot of it is simply normal gear you can lose (or gain from salvaging after a battle if you kill someone with it). However, the stat differences aren't enough to create a giant gap between players.

So is it inaccessible? Not really. You'll have to spend time to get anything, and you'll greatly benefit from reading up on what you're doing. But you'll enjoy that time (you'll even get an Academy mode to start, which puts you into random battles with new players), playing in dynamic matches and learning. It also won't cost you any real money if you don't want to, and you won't be so far behind as to be crippled. There'll also be more content coming out along the line, like any MMO, so there should be new things by the time it gets repetitive. C&G

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MGR: Blade Wolf

REVIEW BY WAYNE SANTOS

80

PLAYED ON: PS3
DEVELOPER: Capcom
PUBLISHER: Capcom
ESRB: M

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance managed to not embarrass the *MGS* franchise by proving to be a hectic, well executed action game. The DLC that's been coming out in the wake of the game's release... not so much. *Blade Wolf* is the latest addition to the *MGR:R* library, and this time players take control of the robotic, AI wolf that eventually becomes Raiden's sidekick. The DLC is a prequel, taking place before Raiden shows up, and chronicles the relationship between Blade Wolf (or LQ-84i) and Mistral, one of the PMC bosses of the original game. There's not a whole lot of story told in this short 90 minutes addition, but they manage to stuff in some robotic existential angst and musings on the nature of freedom.

Typically fragmented Kojima-esque plotting aside, what's on show here is a less powerful character, dealing with both combat and a significant element of stealth. This is not an easy bit of DLC, and it assumes players have finished the original game and still retain their skill for it. So despite having a few tutorial levels in the beginning, once the game proper gets underway, the difficulty is equivalent to the last quarter of the original game. Playing as a cybernetic wolf also feels a bit disorienting simply because the "hitbox" is different, and Blade Wolf's shorter, longer body changes the dynamic of the parry system, which requires players to hit the attack button and move the stick in the direction the attack is coming from. Easy to do when everyone is the same height, but it adds an element of uncertainty with a smaller character as to the whether the attack is coming from the left or above. Other differences are that Blade Wolf has a smaller range of moves and is not as durable, or damaging as Raiden eventually becomes.

This is where the surprising stealth element comes in. While Blade Wolf can fight—and in some sections this is unavoidable—there are other portions of the DLC where it's preferable to go the traditional *Metal Gear* route and sneak around enemies, coming up behind them for stealth kills. That's not to say the stealth is mandatory, you can still fight it out if need be, but it's much harder with the slower, less powerful Blade Wolf than it is with Raiden and his insanely fast combos. In some ways, it feels a bit like Konami cheated with the DLC, taking a character with power levels from the beginning of the game and throwing him into the deep end at the last quarter mark. The final boss is also quite difficult, with the crucial parry system breaking down somewhat thanks to the confusing direction of attacks.

All in all, this is a functional piece of DLC, but not particularly fun, but hardly a necessary addition as something like a *Mass Effect* or *Red Dead Redemption* add-on. It works, but it's short, difficult and doesn't add much C&G

Borderlands 2:
Tiny Tina's Assault On Dragon's Keep
REVIEW BY WAYNE SANTOS

80

PC

PLAYED ON: PS3
DEVELOPER: Gearbox
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
ESRB: M

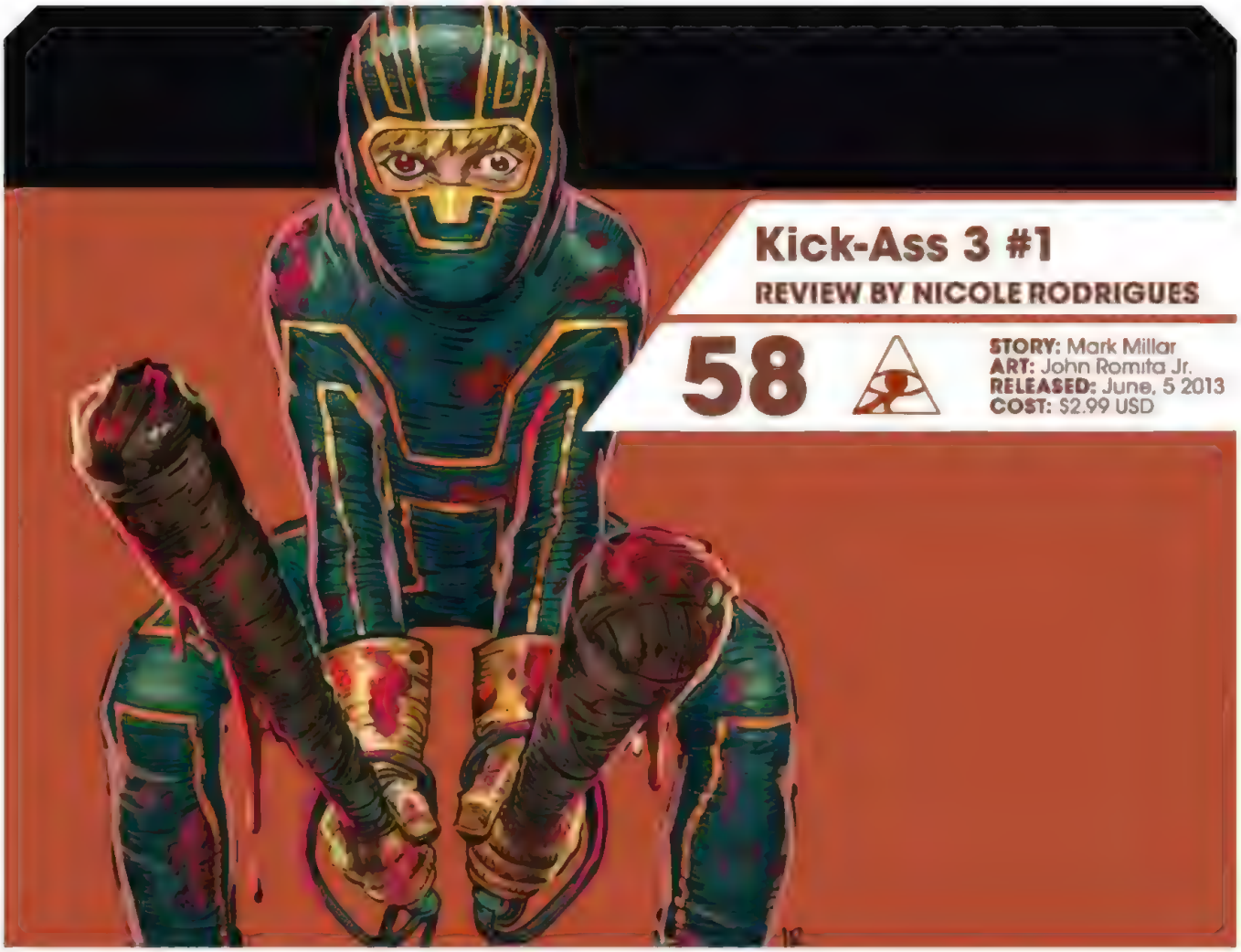
There's an extremely mischievous, subversive intelligence at work in the ridiculous hijinks of Gearbox's final expansion to *Borderlands 2*. The last piece of DLC is ostensibly an excuse for Gearbox to throw players into a fantasy setting, but for writer Anthony Burch, it was also an opportunity to examine the psychology, tropes and traditions of the RPG and blow large, hilarious holes in them. *Borderlands* fans of a satirical mindset are in for a real treat with *Tiny Tina's Assault On Dragon's Keep.*

The premise of *TTAODK* is that Tiny Tina is hosting a game of "Bunkers & Bad Asses" and has gathered the original vault hunters to play. In essence, players are interacting with an "in-game simulation" of what's happening on the table as dice are rolled and players argue with a Dungeon Master about whether an event is legit or not. The DLC analyses and skewers the D&D culture, fantasy clichés, and even has one of the funniest examples of nerd exclusion committed to a videogame. In other words, this DLC is comedy gold.

There's no point getting into mechanics or presentation here; this is *Borderlands 2*, it plays exactly the way it always has. As with past DLC, this gives the art team an excuse to stretch their muscles, and the result is that players finally get a chance to wander around in a magical fantasy realm filled with fairies, and shoot them with automatic weapons. There's something deeply satisfying about seeing an aged, wondrous Treant roaming on the horizon and getting it in your sights with a Maliwan fire sniper rifle for a critical damage headshot.

Even though this DLC will be available to players straight out of the gate when they unlock fast travel terminals, it's not recommended as a destination for new players. Get some XP, and get some decent guns, otherwise you will be overwhelmed when you hit this place.

For those who have the wherewithal to brave this DLC, you're coming here for the laughs and maybe the XP if you haven't already maxed out the new level cap. The combat is still as fun and challenging as it ever was. The running commentary from the Vault Hunters as players, and Tina as the deranged Dungeon Master is exactly the kind of thing you'd hear in a typical D&D game, or even the sorts of questions one would ask of any suspicious plot point or mechanic in a fantasy game. If you ever poked holes at flimsy fantasy set-ups, this DLC is bound to elicit a laugh. The only real downside to this DLC is lack of loot. Most of the rewards are straight up money and XP, with little of the generosity for new guns that was shown in earlier DLC like *Captain Scarlett & Her Pirate's Booty*. That aside, this is a worthy capstone on the *Borderlands 2* DLC, and fans of the series should enjoy their last jaunt on Pandora. CG



Kick-Ass 3 #1

REVIEW BY NICOLE RODRIGUES

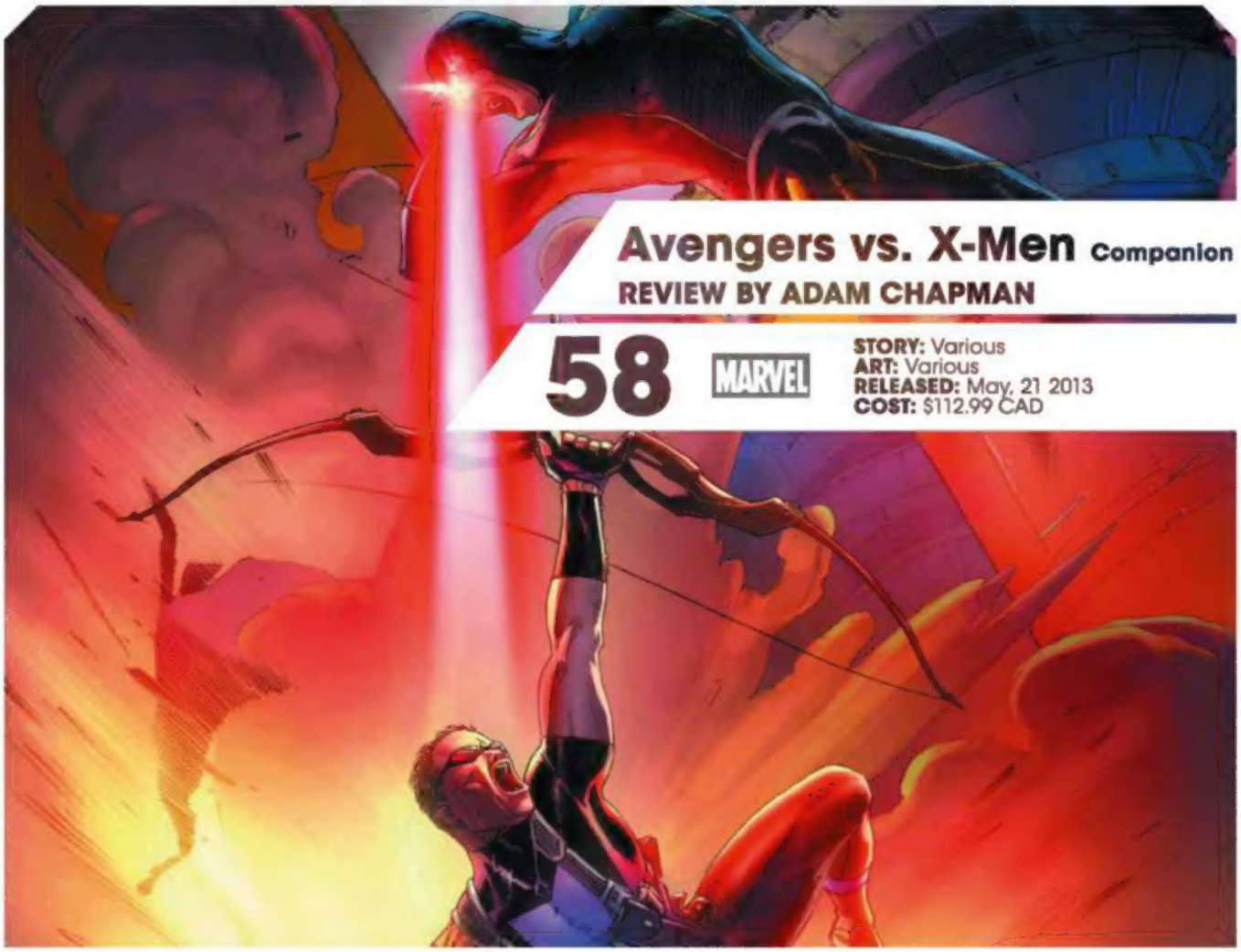
58

STORY: Mark Millar
ART: John Romita Jr.
RELEASED: June, 5 2013
COST: $2.99 USD

Mark Millar's original *Kick-Ass* series turned the idea of superheroes on its head, bringing brutal realism to the concept and creating a more believable teen hero in Dave Lizewski than we'd seen in years. With every bone-crunching, bloody fight he got into, fans cheered harder and louder in the hopes of seeing *Kick-Ass* succeed against the bad guys. It's ironic then, that *Kick-Ass 3* feels like the series is on the receiving end of a beating, as the ideals and justice Lizewski fought for previously take a back seat to looking like Batman at his parents grave. Seriously? I hope it was Mark Millar and John Romita Jr.'s intent to turn fans against the protagonist, because that's what this issue did for me. After Hit-Girl lands herself in prison, she leaves detailed steps for Lizewski and friends to bust her out, except they all lose their nerve before taking one step through the door. So much for heroes, I suppose. They're more focused on their image than actually making a difference, with some members contributing nothing while abusing the resources Hit-Girl left them for her escape. This issue is a sad mess, leaving next to nothing for fans to identify with or cheer for, to the extent that when Lizewski finds himself in a dangerous situation on the last page, it had no impact on me, despite obviously meant to be a big reveal.

...NOT WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR IN A BOOK ABOUT HEROES.

The art is still great, that hasn't changed at least. It's a very visually distinctive book, even if the subject matter has become a bit dubious. Making fans hate these heroes may be what Millar and Romita Jr. were intending to do, but after a lukewarm return with *Kick-Ass 2* and Hit-Girl's solo series, I'm wondering if it isn't time to put this series out of its misery. It feels like more of the same shtick, without any of the excitement and suspense that made the original so great. Maybe they're trying to be even more realistic? Letting the heroes become the villains, or even worse, become these lazy sadsacks that are literally living off of an eleven year old girl's hard work, just so readers can watch them come out of it? Or perhaps more realistically, fall into obscurity and spend the rest of their days losing their courage and honour. That's a little too real for me, and not what I'm looking for in a book about heroes. C&G



Avengers vs. X-Men Companion

REVIEW BY ADAM CHAPMAN

58

MARVEL

STORY: Various
ART: Various
RELEASED: May. 21 2013
COST: $112.99 CAD

The *Avengers vs. X-Men Companion* hard cover is one of the best-value collections I've ever seen published from either Marvel or DC, as every single *AVX* tie-in is presented and brought together in one titanic volume. Yes, it's at times extremely unwieldy, because of its size, but it's also nice to have the entire *Avengers versus X-Men* crossover collected in two hardcovers, this volume and the main *AVX* hardcover. This particular volume brings together a bucketload of tie-ins, with a grand total of 51 issues brought together into this massive volume.

This is a hard collection to review, because there are so many different titles represented, with a plethora of artists and writers bringing the stories to life. Overall, this event is surprisingly coherent all the way through, and this is represented by the various tie-ins. The tie-ins flesh out the main event, by adding new dimensions to the proceedings, as the Avengers and X-Men clash, initially over the fate of Hope Summers, and later as the Avengers oppose the super-powered rule of the Phoenix Five. Brian Michael Bendis writes various tie-ins from the Avengers franchise, that he was writing at the time, and it allows him to flesh out characters and incidents that were given shorter thrift in the main *AVX* book. Not all of these tie-ins feel essential, especially the issues of Secret Avengers and Avengers that take place in space, following the adventures of the space-bound contingent of the Avengers. The stories don't really go anywhere, they overlap in terms of the content and how the characters are written, and in the grand scheme of things, the event ended up making the space-contingent feel very unimportant or inconsequential. *The New Avengers* issues which focus on the connection between the Iron Fist and the Phoenix are surprisingly fun and enjoyable, with Mike Deodato brilliantly illustrating the stories. Near the end of the *AVX* event, there are a couple of *Uncanny X-Men* issues which are absolutely stellar, and add an extra level to the final battle against Cyclops and Emma Frost. The collection also shows what happens once the event is over in the *AVX Consequences* mini-series, and I'm especially glad to see the *A-Babies vs. X-Babies* one-shot included here as well.

Thanks to deep discounts either at comic shops or at e-retailers like Amazon, you can get this book at a discount which makes it an even better bargain. You get every tie-in for this event, for much cheaper than it would have initially cost to purchase all these tie-ins independently. The writing and artwork is at times inconsistent, but that's to be expected when so many different series are represented in one volume. It was fun to read all these tie-ins again, and that's the true value of this new collection. CG

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I've been hearing talk that this generation is going to be the last console generation. What do you guys think?

- CloudSquall91

It's pretty unlikely that this generation of consoles is going to be the final one. If we ever arrive at a day where all our games are streamed to us, it's still going to require some kind of box or other device to do this, and those boxes themselves will still be prey to aging tech. The Xbox One and the PS4 still have one foot too firmly in the "traditional" perception of consoles to be the final boxes we put under our TVs, and with factors like data caps and unreliable internet connections the world over—including North America if you're not living in a big city—ditching physical media means throwing away dollars. The market is still not yet ready for that. In 15 years however? That might be a different story.

I saw the E3 conferences and the early console reveals and I have one question. How could Microsoft *not* know they were in a bad place and be forced to back pedal like that? Why didn't they just have reasonable policies from the start and avoid embarrassing themselves like that?

- TheMeatMeet

For the answer to this question, you don't need to look much further than Sony circa 2006 and the launch of the PS3. They put out a system that cost $600, had few games, and was an ordeal for developers to work on and launched a year after their rivals. They somehow thought that was going to be a huge hit because they were Sony; they'd won the previous generation and they assumed the brand loyalty would be there. Microsoft made the same assumption this time. They thought being the House of *Halo* would make all things forgivable, and, like Sony, they found they were wrong. Victory can make you arrogant, but at least Microsoft changed direction quickly.

Why is the Cloud a big deal for consoles? Why doesn't Sony use it a well?

- Jimmy_Harkonnen

Ah, the "Cloud." It's a word that's been tossed out a lot lately, thanks to marketing latching on to its more romantic, emotional connotations. It's also a lot more impressive to say that than "Internet," or "Online," which is what it really is. Funnily enough, no one seems to want to read "Cloud Mail," despite the fact that our current understanding of "Cloud Tech" puts e-mail squarely in there as well. The Cloud could be useful for consoles, but not in any way that makes a PS4 suddenly act like a PS8. This does not increase the computational power of hardware. What it does do—at least in the case of the Xbox One—is theoretically offload some of that computational power that doesn't need to be used right away and leave system resources free to concentrate on more immediate problems. So an open world game might transfer some of the activity—like NPC behavior and weather—that's not actually happening around the player to the Cloud, and recall that data once the player enters that area. And Sony *has* been using the Cloud, that's what all that online save storage that PS+ users enjoy is all about. Basically, Cloud access is nice to have, but it doesn't radically alter the state of the game. C&G

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